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NEGATIVE THEOLOGY AND UTOPIAN THOUGHT IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

Determined Negations

Jason Lagapa

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for Tenney Nathanson

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Contents

1 Introduction 1

2 Our Message Was Electric: Susan Howe and the Resuscitation of Failed Utopian Projects 15
Notes 39

3 And Be Whole Again: Antiphony, Deprivation, and the "Not-Yet" Place of Utopia in Nathaniel Mackey's *Splay Anthem* 41
Notes 64

4 Leave Us the World: Apophasis, Dissent and the Pluralist Politics of Charles Bernstein's Poetry 67
Notes 90

5 Pages to Come: Utopian Longing and the Merging of the Detective Story with the Artist's Novel in Alice Notley's *Disobedience* 91
Note 116

6 Afterword—Not Yet the End: the Resistance to Closure in Bloch's Anticipatory Consciousness and Contemporary Experimental Poetry 117

Works Cited 127

Index 133

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This chapter takes as its subject the utopian imagination in contemporary American poetry and explores the ways in which experimental poets—Language writers and other formally innovative poets—formulate a utopian poetics by adopting the rhetorical principles of negative theology. Lagapa argues that an understanding of negative theology is essential to recognizing the utopian potential of American experimental poetry. Negative theology proposes using negative statements as a means of attesting to the superior, unrepresentable being of God, and a strategy of negation similarly proves optimal for depicting the subject of utopia in literary works. Negative statements in contemporary experimental poetry illustrate the potential for utopian social change not by portraying an ideal world itself but by revealing the very challenge of representing utopia directly.

Keywords Utopia · Negative theology · Language poetry · Experimental poetry · Negation

This book takes as its subject the utopian imagination in contemporary American poetry and explores the ways in which experimental poets—Language writers and other formally innovative poets—formulate a utopian poetics by adopting the rhetorical principles of negative theology.

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The recourse to negative theology for utopian literary projects is a necessary one. Just as negative theology proposes using negative statements as a means of attesting not only to the superior being of God but also to the representational deficiencies of language, a strategy of negation proves to be an optimal approach for conveying the elusive, hard-to-represent subject of utopia. The premise of negative theology, or the apophatic tradition, is that language is unequal to the task of depicting God's transcendent being. As Jacques Derrida has written, "negative theology consists of considering that every predicative language is inadequate to the essence, in truth to the hyperessentiality . . . of God; consequently, only a negative ('apophatic') attribution can claim to approach God" (4). Utopia is a concept that similarly defies representation and outstrips efforts to depict it: the goal of creating a viable blueprint for an ideal society is elusive, and literary depictions of utopia all too often bear a stain of implausibility. A feasible utopian society can seem, consequently, impossible to envision, beyond the scope of the human imagination. It is the argument of this book that negative rhetorical constructions—including negative phrasing, negative particles, and other forms of grammatical negation—are key to a proper understanding of the utopian literary projects of experimental poets, for such negation instructively indicates the logic of negative theology at work and appropriately addresses the complex challenges of presenting utopia. A strategy of negation, in this manner, provides a means of postulating utopian ideals, particularly as a straightforward and direct rendering of utopia would undermine the force of utopian thought and fail to express the transformative potential of utopian principles.

Understanding the political claims that have been made by experimental poets is vital to ascertaining how and why the tenets of negative theology are employed for utopian poetics. In *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writers and Literary History*, Bob Perelman, after duly accounting for the complexity and diversity of Language writing, outlines a generalized, common endeavor for Language writers, which was to create works in "opposition to the prevailing institutions of American poetry" (12). Elaborating further, Perelman writes that the group of writers from the early seventies who would later be called "Language poets" did have a "loose set of goals, procedures, habits and verbal textures: breaking the automatism of the poetic 'I' and its naturalized voice; foregrounding textuality and formal devices; using or alluding to Marxist or poststructuralist theory in order to open the present to critique

and change" (13). These aims went hand in hand with a commitment to political and social ideals, even if a politically informed poetics was antithetical to the ethos of the era: "the poet as engaged, oppositional intellectual, and poetic form and syntax as sites of experiment for political purposes—these [at this time] would not be found" (Perelman 12). In response to a poetic environment seemingly disinterested in political and social change, Language writers would form a loose collective of poets whose work was an intervention into the politics and poetry of the status quo.

The degree to which Language poets and writers of experimental poetry are able achieve their goal of intervening in social and political problems facing the world has, however, been the subject of much debate. The espousal of an experimental, socially committed poetics indeed raises the question of poetry's efficacy to realize a political end. Speaking, like Perelman, of the poet as a public intellectual, Ron Silliman makes plain his case that the politics of contemporary poetry hinge upon the relation between thought and language to create what he calls a "social practice": "language, and thus the poem, is inextricably involved with thought, and through this with the entire function of the intellectual . . . for whom thinking is a ground for social practice. Writing is itself a form of action" (4). Silliman's linking together of thought, writing and action is an effort to illustrate that language is enmeshed with the political and to affirm that language is never neutral nor is it ideologically free—that is, absent of politics. The Language poets' tendency to foreground how language works and to refuse to treat language as given, moreover, can have profound—even political—implications, as Linda Reinfeld elaborates: "by examining, and on occasion deliberately exaggerating, the effects of formal logic and linguistic structures on our own thinking, [Language poetry] demonstrates how those structures can determine what we see and how we behave" (4). However, the Language poets' more intricate claims—steeped in linguistic and poststructuralist theories—about the utopian capacity of their work remain open for scrutiny. Indeed, what prompts the sharpest debate is the stated interest of Language writers to free language from its habitual role as an instrument of political power and also to mitigate the complicity of language with the dominant mode (of late capitalist) discourse.

Tenney Nathanson has argued persuasively that the "utopian strain" of poets like Steve McCaffery and Charles Bernstein, for instance, is "both theoretically problematic and at odds with the textures of the poems themselves" (309). Assessing the utopian impulse within the literary projects of the Language poets, Nathanson isolates two specific theoretical claims about the transformative potential of Language poetry with regard

to formal innovation and linguistic and syntactic fragmentation. First, when a reader is confronted, for instance, by fragmentary syntax and unorthodox form in a Bernstein poem, Nathanson contends, the reader can come to an understanding of the poem, according to the conventions of Language poetry, whereby the production of meaning shifts as much to the reader of the poem as to its writer. In this sense, the reader participates in the process of constructing meaning, an activity that—along with the Language poem's formal fragmentation—displaces and disrupts the aura of the individual poetic "voice" so esteemed in MFA program workshops and mainstream poetry.

The second claim that Nathanson addresses concerns linguistic reference, whereby Language poets propose that, within their poems, signifiers can become freed from signifieds. Taking up Steve McCaffrey's poetics, Nathanson writes: "McCaffrey's other reading paradigm . . . attacks not just the idea that reference is something already encoded which we consume rather than produce, but the very notion of reference itself. A text that so persistently makes referential projection difficult, that is, might be conceived as doing with out [reference], as simply, so to speak, being itself—'a signifier,' as McCaffery's solecism puts it, 'without a signified and whose destination is inward to the center of its own form'" (Nathanson 311). This second position, in other words, would argue that a Language poem could be extricated from the system of language and modes of discourse that govern all other forms of writing and speech, existing as a pure signifier without reference to meaning beyond itself.

The desire for pure signification freed from signifieds or meanings becomes the main sticking point for Nathanson and other critics. Nathanson contends that the release from meaning is impossible, stating that "such expressive potential [of pure signification] is disturbed in turn by the recalcitrant and seemingly ineffaceable presence of symbolic structures, codes that reshape [the poetic text's] performance and expropriate its gestures, alienating them in the very moment of their enunciation" (313). In short, the formal fragmentation characteristic of many Language poems cannot so easily be separated from the conventions of speech that shadow all language and therefore "conveys a strong sense of the inescapability of the already spoken" (Nathanson 313). In other words, Language, even language that is fragmentary, nonsensical, and void of context, is difficult to conceive of as *not* being part of speech or the conventions of grammar and syntax, even as it violates such conventions. The reader, in confronting such a text, necessarily responds to it as a communication of speech and attempts to make meaning of it.

Norman Finkelstein, registering his own skepticism about the prospects of Language poetry and its utopian implications, formulates a similar complaint and associates language poetry with what he calls—following Foucault—the "utopia of language" (106). For Foucault, Finkelstein contends, language is, "equally the product of ideological and utopian thought," simultaneously expressive of a "repressive power" and "a utopian space in normative social relations where reference and self are blissfully destabilized" (106). In "The Discourse on Language," Foucault further expands upon the utopian aspects of language and writes of his yearning to be engulfed by language, "enveloped in words, borne way beyond all possible beginnings" in a dream of speech liberated from the matrices of power that infuse language (Foucault 215). However, such a dream of being "borne away" to some original space that predates the system of language, as Foucault acknowledges, is unattainable. Finkelstein likewise recognizes the impossibility of developing an unencumbered language, one that is freed from ideological dynamics: "Discourse, which in its 'true' (that is, its ideal) state would be innocent of desire and power, is in its actual state complicitous in the machinations of [power and] our will to truth" (*Utopian Moment* 107). The unavoidable fact that language is always embedded within semantic codes or vectors of institutional power thus renders, as Nathanson and Finkelstein illustrate, the Language poets' utopian aim to create texts composed of pure signifiers or liberated bits of language problematic.

While Nathanson and Finkelstein seem to hold a hard line against the linguistic claims of textual freedom advanced by Language poets, both of them also speak to the utopian *potential* of Language writing that is yet to be achieved. The distinction between realization and potential is a key one. The utopian project of Language writers and experimental poets ought not to be viewed as fully realized or accomplished by the texts themselves; the poems instead indicate the latent or deferred nature of the utopian drive. For Nathanson, Language poems, in their desire to disrupt linguistic norms and discursive systems through formal experimentation, are not themselves utopian but *could* lead, in a practical manner, to political action that has a socially progressive and utopian end: "[Bernstein's] poems do not embody a language that would escape symbolic constraint, but instead register, in their straining against received discourse and normative syntax, the desire for such apocalyptic liberation. Unrealized and perhaps unrealizable, this desire may nonetheless energize political practice" (316). Finkelstein's own take on the utopian impulse of experimental poetry focuses equally on

provisional aspects of utopia but deals less with pragmatic political action and more with textual and hermeneutic matters. Following Ernst Bloch, Finkelstein puts a primacy on hope as an index of utopian potential, seeing the work of utopian thought as unfinished: "Just as hope is always thwarted and utopian fulfillment is always latent, both struggling under the stern sign of the 'not yet,' so specific acts, statements, and decisions are to be regarded as provisional and incomplete" (*Utopian Moment* 152). The burden of utopian thought shifts, for Finkelstein to a combination of the latent power of the poetic text and to the reader or critic who interprets it: "Thus poetry, like dreams (or nightmares), calls for interpretation and an extreme sensitivity to the tendency and latency encoded in the text. And because both poets and interpreters live in history, their work can only be conditional: their truth is always pending" (*Utopian Moment* 155). Though skeptical of the assertions Language poets make that their work is already, or in itself, liberatory, Nathanson and Finkelstein are sympathetic both to the political vision of Language poetry and to the utopian potential that the poetry could stir in others, whether as politically engaged citizens or as reader-critics.

An alternate approach to understanding the utopian impulses of contemporary experimental poetry is to recognize such impulses as rendered indirectly and in the negative. Latent and unrealized, the utopian potential of contemporary experimental American poetry indeed becomes more apparent within the context of negative theology, particularly as the tenets of negative theology advocate the use negation and indirection to represent an elusive, transcendent idea that is seemingly impossible to represent. The discourses of utopia and negative theology prove in this manner to be compatible, and there exists in fact a long intellectual tradition linking utopian thought with negative theology. Relating the Jewish custom of avoiding the naming of god to utopian discourse, Russell Jacoby sees the principles of negative theology as a fitting strategy for contending with the concept of utopia, a stance he identifies in writings of Jewish intellectuals from Martin Buber and Gustav Landauer to Ernst Bloch, Gershom Scholem, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin: "The refusal to describe God transmutes into the refusal to describe utopia, which can only be depicted in negative terms. Yet like the resistance to naming God, the reluctance to depict utopia does not diminish but exalts it. It bespeaks the gap between now and then. It refuses to reduce the unknown future to the well-known present, the hope to its cause" (35–6). A negative approach to the depiction of utopia leaves the as-yet-to-arrive

status of utopian potential intact, and instead of providing a positive or final, completed version of utopia, the strategy of negation presents utopia as an unrealized ideal to which society can aspire. Enmeshed in a kind of stasis between present and the future, and between reality and the ideal, utopian thinking, as Jacoby avers, "consists of more than daydreams and doodles. It emerges out of and returns to contemporary political realities. . . . [The utopian project] partakes at once of the limited choices of the day and the unlimited possibilities of the morrow. It straddles two time zones: the one we inhabit now and the one that might exist in the future" (146). The suitability of negative theology for utopian discourse is twofold: it engages in a critical negation of the present social order and attempts to designate—through indirection and negation—what utopia might be like without foreclosing the "unlimited possibilities" available to the future.

The embrace of negative theology for utopian projects ensures that utopian thought is primarily a negative, critical discourse. Negation has, of course, always informed literary conceptions of utopia from its beginning. Thomas More's coinage of the term, as is well known, encompassed a double meaning, with the etymology of *Utopia* summoning implications of both "no-place" (*Utopia*) and "well-place" (*Eutopia*) (6 and 121, footnote). Built into the concept of utopia, and into the genre of utopian literature, then, is a challenge of depicting a perfect society that is nonexistent and that is nowhere, and this state of nonexistence brings to utopian thought an inherently negative characteristic. In a discussion with Ernst Bloch of the negations and contradictions of utopian longing, Theodor Adorno speaks of the fundamentally negative gist of utopian thought, "utopia is essentially in the determined negation, in the determined negation of that which merely is, and by concretizing itself as something false, it always points at the same time to what should be" (Bloch, *Utopian Function* 12). Bloch, too, sees utopian thought as performing a sustained act of negative critique that nonetheless entails the desire for the ideal: "each and every criticism of imperfection, incompleteness, intolerance, and impatience already without a doubt presupposes the conception of, and longing for, a possible perfection" (*Utopian Function* 16). Even Bloch's favored term—hope—includes within it negative principles. Hope, in Bloch's view, is partially defined by negation, for hope is not simply a matter of uncritical optimism or unquestioned certainty: "Hope is not confidence. If it could not be disappointed, it would not be hope. . . . Thus hope is critical and can be disappointed" (*Utopian*

Function 16–7). Nevertheless, hope, and the utopian longing it expresses, aims to surpass what would endanger it: "Hope is surrounded by dangers, and it is in the consciousness of danger and at the same time the determined negation of that which continually makes the opposite of the hoped-for object possible" (*Utopian Function* 17). For utopian thought to operate smoothly, it must trace a path that carefully balances the critical and the hopeful, and negation is indispensible in such an endeavor. Negation, for Adorno and Bloch, fuels a critique of present social realities, but hope—Bloch's notion of a vigilant and active belief in the future—also comes to proper fruition through negation of what would lead to political complacency and apathy. As Bloch adroitly puts it, "Hope is the opposite of security. It is the opposite of naïve optimism" (*Utopian Function* 16).

Fredric Jameson, though he does not use negative theology as a term, has likewise argued that utopian thinking is a negative critical discourse, particularly because utopian thought consistently suffers from a crisis of representation. Jameson calls the representational dilemma that surrounds utopian discourse the "unknowability thesis," which postulates that utopian works are hindered because "so radically different a society [as utopia] cannot even be imagined" (*Archaeologies* 142). However, the true purpose of utopian literary works is less to posit a fully realized ideal world than to present a critique of present society that hints at the path to social progress. Indeed, Jameson, in an echo of Adorno, outlines the critical tenor of utopian literary works as foundational to their design: "the Utopian remedy must first be a fundamentally negative one" (*Archaeologies* 12). As Jameson further explains, "it is a mistake to approach Utopias with positive expectations, as though they offered visions of happy worlds, spaces of fulfillment and cooperation, representations which correspond generically to the idyll or the pastoral rather than the utopia" (*Archaeologies* 12). Instead, utopian texts "are . . . maps and plans to be read negatively, as what is to be accomplished after the demolitions and the removals" of the social, political, and economic inequalities that plague the world (*Archaeologies* 12). Jameson's "unknowability thesis," in this manner, underscores again the affinities between utopian discourse and negative theology. Utopia is unknowable, unrecognizable in precisely the same manner that God is deemed beyond knowing or beyond a full and complete representation. Consequently, negation, or the rhetoric of negation, is indispensable to an apprehension of both God and utopia.

There are critical precedents for reading negation and negative theology as a compelling and fundamental aspect of American and European

literature and for discerning in literary negations utopian and political import. In *Parables of Possibility: The American Need for Beginnings*, Terence Martin has demonstrated the extent to which American literature develops from, and sustains itself through, a rhetorical mode of negation, such that "American negatives constitute a secular version of the body of apophatic [or negative] theology" (63). The impetus for the strategy of negation in American literature, Martin argues, was to distinguish America from Europe, and the American desire for new beginnings—continuing long past the Revolutionary era—reveals a utopian drive at the heart of American culture and literature: "it is a protean mode of discourse, sustained by a common structure, generated by impulses that are frequently iconoclastic and utopian. And it functioned in American hands as a way of stripping away possibility so that one could measure the power of an original world" (53). Shira Wolosky, in *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan*, has also charted the ways in which negative theology, or what she calls the "inexpressibility topos," functions in the writing of three modernist writers. Wolosky concerns herself with negation as a defining twentieth-century literary motif, especially within the historical context of World War II, and examines how each writer embraces negative theological tenets to illustrate their skepticism about language and its ability to depict a transcendent spiritual state. The deficiency of language and the subject of inexpressibility become for Eliot, Beckett, and Celan a negative index of a spiritual wholeness or truth: "A negative approach to language is almost always central to the mystical desire for ultimacy," particularly as the "assertion of what language cannot say is a traditional means for designating an ultimate realm beyond formulation" (Wolosky 3).

Wolosky argues, moreover, that there is a political dimension to the inexpressibility topos; our desire to get beyond language may point to "a failure in our culture to acknowledge and take responsibility for the actions we perform in the concrete conditions of history" (8). While the inexpressibility topos indicates a retreat from language into spiritual and metaphysical contemplation, Wolosky suggests one might be better off to embrace language despite its deficiencies, for the "mundane" or worldly characteristics of language return us to reality and make us aware of our social responsibilities. "The negative boundaries of language then remind us of our own limitations, while its positive embrace calls us toward full responsibility within the realms of our action and of our utterance" (271).

Martin's recognition of the utopian search for American cultural renewal in the rhetoric of negation and Wolosky's call for political responsibility that arises from her analysis of the inexpressibility topos signal ways in which one might apprehend the nexus of negative theology and utopian projects in the work of American experimental poets writing in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. For my own study, I read the grammatical use of negation—in the form of negative particles or phrasing—in contemporary experimental poetry as a social and political critique, one that indicates the utopian imagination at work and functions in a manner consistent the principles of negative theology. J. P. Williams, discussing negative theology within Christianity and Buddhism, has termed the rhetorical strategy of using a series of negations and contradictions the development of an "apophatic hue," in which a spiritually transcendent state unfolds, whether indicating a mystical union with God for Christians or a path to enlightenment for Buddhists. What I seek to demonstrate is that contemporary American experimental poets likewise use rhetorical negation, less to indicate a spiritually transcendent state—though their poems might be suffused with religious language and implications—than to articulate the potential and the possibilities for utopia.

Reading the negation in contemporary poetry according to the tenets of negative theology, then, contributes to a complex hermeneutic attuned to, and able to reveal, the utopian content that is latent or hidden in the act of negation. Finkelstein has called such an approach to interpretation a "restorative hermeneutic," a phrase he adopts from Paul Ricoeur as he describes Bloch's desire to unearth utopian content in literary texts: "Bloch puts his hope in the incompleteness of the cultural process. From this perspective, cultural production consists of shards waiting to be raised to a utopian state through the *mitzvah* of criticism (or revolution) and requiring a materialist understanding of aesthetics" (*Utopian Moment* 151). If the negations of contemporary experimental poetry are to be read appropriately, the reader or critic must recognize and interpret negative constructions as an index of utopian potential. "Bloch's utopianism imposes difficult conditions upon those who invest in it. Just as hope is always thwarted and utopian fulfillment is always latent, both struggling under the stern sign of the 'not yet,' so specific acts statements and decisions are to be regarded as provisional and incomplete" (Finkelstein, *Utopian Moment* 152).

Each of the following chapters pursues an interpretation of the negative statements and constructions in the work of contemporary poets, locating in these phrases a strategy akin to negative theology, one that conveys the promise of utopian ideals obliquely and through negation. The poets

whose work I examine—Susan Howe, Nathaniel Mackey, Charles Bernstein, and Alice Notley—all share to some degree the tenets of Language writing, including an antipathy or skepticism about the dominant practices of conventional poetry, an embrace of experimental forms and techniques, and, in most instances, an awareness, and use, of critical or poststructuralist theory. However, none—even Charles Bernstein, a founding member of Language poetry—fully embrace the term for themselves. For the purposes of my argument, I use the broader term of "experimental poetry" to address the disparate work of a few poets who possess a common belief in innovative poetic practice and who explore ways of directing poetic form toward a vision of utopia. At the same time, I remain mindful that the matter of utopian thought as it relates to contemporary experimental poetry owe much of its genesis to debates within the Language poetry community about utopian principles and poetic form.

The first chapter reveals the utopian impulse and rhetoric of negation that underpin both Susan Howe's poetry and her investigation of the historical past, by placing particular emphasis on Howe's interest in failed utopian societies. Among Howe's many poems that explore America's cultural past, two works, the *Souls of the Labadie Tract* and *The Midnight*, specifically address the consequences of failed utopian social ideals. Central to each book is a visionary figure whose utopian plans fall short of materializing as intended: Jean de Labadie is a seventeenth-century pastor whose religious beliefs are the basis of a utopian sect in Cecil County, Maryland, in the *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, and renowned landscape designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, figures prominently in *The Midnight* for his plans to build a progressive municipal park in Buffalo, New York. Despite the collapse of each of these men's plans, Howe sees a vital history and energy that might be resuscitated from their social vision and their quest for an ideal community. The subject of failed social programs often prompts Howe to use negative phrasing to capture what has faltered in each leader's intentions, yet the recurrent use of negative language also summons the opposite of failure, indicating what could be learned from mistakes of the past and projecting a utopian promise that Howe believes can be salvaged. Through references to her own writing and creative development, Howe aims to recuperate the seeds of success from such failed visions. For Howe, the failure of utopian experiments is less an indictment of visionary thought than an important lesson in seeing something possible in what has hitherto been deemed impossible, bearing

out Theodor Adorno's belief that "between the evident possibility of fulfillment [of utopia] and the just as evident impossibility," one must compel themselves to "identify with this impossibility and to make this impossibility into [one's] own affair" (Bloch, *Utopian Function* 4).

As a contrast to Howe's figurations of the past, I turn in Chapter Two to Nathaniel Mackey's depiction of an alternate futuristic world in *Splay Anthem* through which he plumbs the possibilities for utopia. Initially, the imagined world that Mackey creates reads as anything but utopian; Mackey presents a dystopian future marked by social deprivation and the aftermath of war, where a lost and wandering tribe must navigate its way through a devastated landscape filled with demolished buildings, amputated limbs and a pervasive sense of dread. For all of its depiction of human misery, however, *Splay Anthem* regards the future with residual amounts of hope and promise. Mackey writes of a utopian potential on the horizon, a destination encapsulated in a negative phrase "not yet" that bears signs of what Ernst Bloch describes as the "anticipatory illumination" of utopia. *Splay Anthem*'s fictive, dystopian spaces, which Mackey has termed "Nub," thus have a twofold purpose: to call to account the all-to-real problems of social inequality and strife in the world and to postulate an alternate future to the one that presently awaits us. Like many dystopian fictions set in the future, *Splay Anthem* predicates itself on the present and draws as well on the traumas of the past in its effort to describe the ways in which humanity has suffered. Though Mackey is vigilant about the ways in which humans have been severed from what makes existence vital and full, he also remains intently aware of the ways in which humankind might be made whole again despite its deprivations.

Alongside Howe's investigation of the failed utopian past and Mackey's premonitions about the future, the possibilities and promise of utopian thought obtain equally for the present moment, which is where I situate the poetry of Charles Bernstein and Alice Notley. In Chapter Three, I undertake a reading of Bernstein's writing in terms of a public defense of poetry that he mounts in a recent work, the prose poem "Recantorium (A Bachelor Machine, After Duchamp After Kafka)." In "Recantorium," Bernstein makes prominent use of the strategy of apophasis—a rhetorical figure of negation wherein an individual denies saying something in the exact moment of saying it. Apophasis is a device that Bernstein has employed in poems since his mid-career, and it offers Bernstein a means to underscore poetic principles important to his writing. Bernstein's denials—steeped in negation—are thus elaborate rhetorical gestures that

not only explain and illustrate his poetic methods but also function as a vigorous defense of his experimental, politically informed poetics. Due to Bernstein's apophatic speech, his poetry can seem argumentative and at odds with itself, and the polemical gist of his writing—which often takes aim at proponents of the conventional voice poem, or what Bernstein calls "Official Verse Culture"—pursues a debate over the purpose and politics of poetry. However, such contentiousness is key to the utopian implications of his poetry. Bernstein understands and imagines the field or discipline of poetry as composing one large polis, in which disagreement and debate are vital for the progress of both poetry and a democratic political process. A dissenting, pluralist politics—signaled by his use of apophasis and negative constructions—constitutes what would be an ideal world and utopian society for Bernstein, in which poetic and political ideals might be perpetually and vehemently contested for the sake of social progress.

Alice Notley likewise addresses the immediate moment of her creative process and the act of composition in her poems in a manner that reveals a utopian longing at the core of her work. In Chapter Four, I examine how the utopian features of Alice Notley's *Disobedience* specifically arise from the book's unlikely fusion of genres, which combines features of a hard-boiled detective mystery and the *kunstlerroman*, or artist's novel, to tell the story of Notley's relocation to Paris and her work on a book that will later become *Disobedience*. Bloch has argued that pulp genres like the detective novel—what he calls *colportage*—offer insight into the workings of the utopian imagination. As Bloch explains, when a detective, in a flash of brilliance, suddenly solves a mystery in crime novel, it is equivalent to gaining an elusive awareness about the formation of utopia. The artist's novel likewise yields a glimpse into the utopian, for the novel of the artist—in its treatment of the work of the imagination—also records an artistic breakthrough, an "anticipatory illumination," Bloch contends, not just of a finished work of art but of a better future. In *Disobedience*, Notley is able to merge the genres of the artist novel and the detective story with the help of a key figure: an alter ego named Mitch Hardwood who guides her transition to Paris and whose cynical, negative demeanor, as a parody of a hard-boiled detective, is an extension of Notley's own caustic, defiant stance as a writer. Negation figures prominently in the poet's acerbic chronicle of Paris and her writing career, as Notley delivers a disgruntled account of everything from French labor strikes

and Parisian etiquette to the gendered politics of the literary and publishing world. Notley's breakthrough comes in the form of a disobedient, negating repudiation of conventional expectations of what poetry is supposed to achieve and through a corresponding act of self-abnegation that strips away aspects of her self that hinder her compositional process. The final compositional question Notley must contend with is how to complete her book, yet it is precisely in the negative, in the unwritten pages to come, that a utopian future is outlined.

The elusive nature of utopia suggests that indirection and negation are necessary features of the utopian imagination. A too-prescriptive treatment of utopia in a literary work not only presents an implausibly perfect society but also closes down possibility, setting down too rigidly what ought to remain provisional in plans for societal progress. For such reasons, utopian thought is conveyed best when construed negatively, as a social critique of present society and, from this critique, the potential for future utopian political action can become apparent. Despite the fact that a utopian society might be difficult to imagine, Jameson writes that the potential for utopian regeneration will only reveal itself indirectly, as a hope or impulse to be realized:

> The Utopian moment is indeed in one sense quite impossible for us to imagine, except as the unimaginable; thus a kind of allegorical structure is built into the very forward movement of the Utopian impulse itself, which always points to something other, which can never reveal itself directly but must always speak in figures, which always calls out structurally for completion and exegesis. (*Marxism and Form* 142)

Negative theology—a mode of thought that attempts to represent what God is by presenting what God is not—provides a sound method for engaging the subject of utopia and spurring the utopian imagination. If, as Jameson contends, the utopian impulse cannot "reveal itself directly but must always speak in figures," an interpretive approach that is steeped in the principles of negative theology allows for, and properly enables, the recognition of the utopian drive as an enterprise undertaken, by necessity, negatively and indirectly.

CHAPTER 2

Our Message Was Electric: Susan Howe and the Resuscitation of Failed Utopian Projects

Abstract This chapter reveals the utopian impulse and rhetoric of negation that underpin Susan Howe's investigation of the historical past. Two of Howe's works, *Souls of the Labadie Tract* and *The Midnight*, address the consequences of failed utopian social ideals. Central to each book is a visionary figure: Jean de Labadie is a seventeenth-century pastor whose religious beliefs inspire a utopian sect in Maryland in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, and landscape designer, Frederick Law Olmsted envisions an ideal municipal park in Buffalo, New York, in *The Midnight*. Lagapa argues that, despite the collapse of these men's plans, a utopian dynamic might be resuscitated from their failed projects, particularly if Howe's poems are read properly—as a negative image of the promise of utopia.

Keywords Susan Howe · Utopia · Negation · Dystopia · Failure · Negation

It would seemingly be hard to construe Susan Howe's poems as having much to do with projections of a utopian future, so steeped is her work with the historical past. Of Howe's entrenched relation to history, Peter Quartermain writes that "Howe is, more than any other American writer . . . except perhaps Melville or Henry Adams, burdened by history," especially as Howe attempts to recuperate ignored or lesser known

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historical events and individuals from "erasure and marginality" (194). However, the imagining of a utopian future is precisely the context in which I would like to situate Howe's later writing, as her forays into history do yield unexpected evidence of utopian longing. In such works as "Souls of the Labadie Tract" and *The Midnight*, for instance, the desire for utopia finds particular expression in Howe's interest in failed or abandoned American utopian projects of the past, and as Howe seeks to recover these social efforts lost to history, she locates, in their very failure, a utopian drive that she considers fundamental to American culture and its future.

The field of utopian studies lends some insight into the ways in which Howe approaches failed utopias, and the genre of science fiction, though seemingly foreign to Howe's own poetry, in fact reveals the ways in which Howe renders conceptions of the future in her work. The claim here is not that Howe writes science fiction, but her attitudes toward the exploration of the historical past, her impulse to imagine the future, and the utopian bent of her work certainly recall genre characteristics of science fiction. Recent scholarship from utopian studies about the structural role of failure in science fiction proves, moreover, relevant to Howe's poetry. Fredric Jameson has argued, for instance, that "the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively" because such failures reveal the limits of our abilities to think beyond our own historical and political situation toward an ideal society (*Archaeologies of Desire* xiii). For Jameson, the true function of utopian literary projects is not to provide a workable image from which to construct a perfect world but to offer an index of what the collective or social imagination lacks: the conceptual means to transform society radically. Howe's attempts to think through potential social change via failed efforts consequently put her work in line with what Jameson has described as science fiction's essential purpose:

> [Science Fiction's] deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future, to body forth, through apparently full representations which prove on closer inspection to be structurally and constitutively impoverished, the atrophy in our time of what Marcuse has called the *utopian imagination*, the imagination of otherness and radical difference. (*Archaeologies of Desire* 288–9)

The purpose of science fiction is thus a negative one, marking a deficiency or lack, and Howe, in her depiction of utopian movements,

will adopt the rhetoric of negation to disclose a still feasible utopian potential embedded within America's social designs of the past. In this paradoxical manner, Howe will depict the failure of utopia in order to reveal the limits to our imagination and thereby outline the potential for utopia.

Howe's engagement with American utopian projects and their failure also raises a corresponding matter of dystopia, as the very lack of success of these utopian communities signals both a bleak outcome and a pessimism about the promise for social progress. The dystopian turn of these relatively small-scale utopian communities, moreover, has implications for the ways in which Howe represents the United States as a whole. Indeed, the vision Howe has of the American nation is a vacillating one: she represents America and the prospects for its future as alternating between the utopian and dystopian. Howe's mixture of dystopian and utopian elements within her poetry correlates closely to what Tom Moylan outlines as characteristics of a "critical dystopia" (196). Critical dystopias are, as Moylan explains, works that portray bleak, downtrodden social conditions, yet "in the midst of their pessimistic forays, they refuse to allow the utopian tendency to be overshadowed by its anti-utopian nemesis. They therefore adopt a militant stance that is informed and empowered by a utopian horizon that appears in the text—or at least shimmers just beyond its pages" (196). In line with this concept of critical dystopia, Howe's "Souls of the Labadie Tract" and *The Midnight* both contain dystopian features that offer social critiques, yet each of these texts, despite the preponderance of dystopian elements, ultimately projects such a "utopian horizon" and the potential for positive social change.

The questioning mode of the critical dystopia directly coheres with Howe's own critical stance toward America. For Howe, America is endowed with an imperative to improve upon its limitations and errors —its flawed history—and to achieve the potential inherent to an American national design premised upon liberty and equality. As Linda Reinfeld observes, Howe presents the transgressions of the past yet posits the possibility for a more just world: "It is [Howe's] intention [not only] to illuminate the condition of all those whose rights have been violated and whose voices have been ignored" but also "to envision a world more authentic than the one all too commonly promised and given" (120). Speaking to the odd, dialectical mix of injustice and fairness in American history, Howe herself has remarked upon both the idealistic and base impulses surrounding the founding of colonial America:

> Why are we [the United States] such a violent nation? Why do we have so much contempt for powerlessness? I feel compelled in my work to go back . . . to the invasion or settling, or whatever the current practice calls it, of *this* place. I am trying to understand what went wrong when the first Europeans stepped on shore here. They came for some reason, something pushed them? Isn't it bitterly ironic that many of them were fleeing the devastation caused by enclosure laws in Britain, and the first thing they did was to put up fences? (*Birth-Mark* 164)

Striving to fathom the nature of the American nation, of "*this* place," Howe encounters a simultaneously utopian and dystopian United States, whose historical past encompasses at once so much societal wreckage and progress and whose present could portend a more promising future, if society's collective imagination and effort is directed correctly. Toward such an end, both "Souls of the Labadie Tract" and *The Midnight* offer utopian projections consistent with what Ernst Bloch describes as the hopeful, anticipatory yet, ultimately, practical function of the imagination: "The anticipatory thus operates in the field of hope; so this hope is not taken *only as a emotion*, as the opposite of fear . . . but *more essentially as a directing act of a cognitive kind* (and here the opposite is then not fear, but memory) . . . The imagination and the thoughts of the future intention described in this way are utopian . . . in the newly tenable sense of the forward dream, of anticipation in general" (*Principle of Hope* 12).

As the concerns of Howe's poetry look toward the past to convey the American future, she aptly adopts the figure of a designer or a societal planner to convey her utopian impulses. Jean de Labadie, the French seventeenth-century religious leader whose ideas inspired the founding of a utopian community in Maryland, is a guiding force in Howe's poem "Souls of the Labadie Tract," and Fredrick Law Olmsted, the nineteenth-century landscape architect whose many designs included Central Park in Manhattan and a municipal park in Buffalo, New York, arises as a central figure in *The Midnight*. Despite the utopian vision of Labadie and Olmsted, the places that Howe associates with the two, Cecil County, Maryland, and Buffalo, New York, respectively, illustrate the vacillating swing between utopia and dystopia. Howe aims to capture within her poetry the derailment of utopian efforts both of the Labadie community and the city of Buffalo, chronicling what befalls each community's strategy for social improvement, yet these communal setbacks serve as a negative

index, as Jameson might argue, of the still viable promise of utopian ideals and efforts.

Howe's utopian project in "Souls of the Labadie Tract" begins by tracing the expansion of Jean de Labadie's religious beliefs to the United States. In 1684, 10 years after Labadie's death, Peter Sluyter and Jasper Danckaerts, two leading members of Labadie's church in Wieuwerd, Friesland, founded a Labadist community named New Bohemia in Cecil County, Maryland. It was at New Bohemia that the Labadists—whom Howe refers to as "a utopian Quietist sect"—sought to retreat from society as they adhered to principles designed to strengthen their faith (*Souls* 23). Bartlett James writes in his historical account *The Labadist Colony in Maryland* that the communal aim for the Labadists was "to awaken in the believer devoutness of spirit by enjoining austerities of life, abnegation of flesh, and renunciation of the world" (James 9).

Howe accordingly presents the Labadists as a devout collective whose austere existence and fervent beliefs forge a tight community with utopian ideals. Toward such a utopian end, Howe depicts the Labadists pledging to acquire perfect spiritual knowledge: "[t]hat we are come to that /Between us here to know /Things in the perfect way" (*Souls* 27). The beauty surrounding New Bohemia will also reflect the utopian mission of the Labadists; Howe describes the setting as a pristine, vibrant locale where "Green cloud conceals green /valley nothing but green" (*Souls* 29). There is, moreover, an ethereal quality to Howe's portrait of the Labadists who extol each other, amidst "silk moth fly mulberry tree," to "Come and come [experience] rapture" (*Souls* 29). Howe also revises, using *The Labadist Colony in Maryland* as a source text, a Labadist covenant described by James as being "clearer, holier and more exalted than its predecessors. Faith was its condition, obedience its sign" (James 11). With a minimalist's spareness, Howe truncates the passage in a manner suggestive of the Labadists' austerity:

> Labadist theology
> Faith its condition
> Obedience its sign (*Souls* 44)

Howe here distills, in three lines and a mere eight words, the principles to which the Labadists adhered, yet the brevity of the lines nevertheless seeks to convey the immensity of purpose of the Labadist community. Howe's initial description of the Labadist colony—an account of the Labadists'

beliefs and the natural beauty of New Bohemia—thus predicates the utopian dynamic that galvanized the community and served as its foundation.

Against the image of an ideal and prospering spiritual community, though, Howe's continued rendering of the Labadist enclave acknowledges that the utopian aims of the Labadists would ultimately succumb to failure. A shift thus occurs in which Howe attends primarily to the failed state of the Labadist colony, and Howe's poem is a reckoning of the Labadists' end in America. Indeed, "Souls of the Labadie Tract" recurrently figures the Labadists as dead souls aware of their community's defunct status: "Oh—we are past saving /Aren't odd books full of us /What do you wake us for" (*Souls* 50). In Howe's imagined dialogue with the Labadist souls, the Labadists plead to be left unto themselves and chidingly communicate their desire to exist as mere text, the dead letters of Howe's archival search. Repeated negations uttered by the Labadists also serve to illustrate the sect's dissolution and futility:

> "Here we are"—You can't
> hear us without having to be
> us knowing everything we
> know—you know you can't (*Souls* 58)

The rhetorical negations in the passage ("you can't"; "you know you can't") speak to the sect's separation from the rest of society and the distinction the Labadists drew between themselves and others. Howe here also conveys the Labadist belief that the Holy Spirit speaks only to a privileged few, operating "by the more direct way of immediate communication to the souls of the elect or faithful" (James 12). These sharp distinctions that the Labadists drew between themselves and others—their isolation from the rest of society—would presumably result in the utopian sect's demise. As James writes, the Labadist colony "was concerned more with intensive spiritual cultivation than with extensive propagation," which leads James to conclude, albeit from a distinctly ideological perspective, that the "communistic form of religion is not suited to longevity or large accomplishments, and must ever remain a Utopian ideal" (41).

The failure of the Labadist colony in Maryland was not wholly without precedent; indeed, Jean de Labadie's difficulties establishing his church in Europe prefigure the doomed nature of the utopian community at New Bohemia. While "Souls of the Labadie Tract" focuses on the Labadists in

America, Howe arguably finds some inspiration for her account of the failed American sect in Labadie's troubled personal past in Europe. Born in Bourg-en-Guyenne, France, Labadie (1610–1674) was never situated in any one place for very long. He could not remain within the good graces of any group with which he became affiliated: Labadie first joined the Jesuits in Bordeaux, but due to conflicts with elder members, he subsequently left to become a Jansenist. Labadie next joined the Calvinists, only to leave and develop his own sect, all the while moving from one European city to the next, residing for short periods in Toulouse, Geneva, Utrecht, and Amsterdam. Michel de Certeau contends that this pattern of dismissals structures Labadie's life and comes to define him: "Labadie falls out of the places that cannot hold him, and that becomes a walking. It ends up being a story because each time, miraculously, other places 'receive' him" (272). Labadie's rejection from one community and his subsequent acceptance into another, then, follow a perverse mindset in which Labadie feels that he and his religious ideals are somehow validated despite being repudiated by others. De Certeau traces Labadie's thinking in this manner:

> Their refusal was a surer guarantee than their admiration. He therefore provoked it . . . Their hostility won him the exceptional place of a martyr whose privilege was the nowhere into which their rejection pushed him. Thus, they upheld his election: a proof by negation. They made him a true "solitary." (280)

For de Certeau, Labadie's faith in himself and his ideals are upheld by a "proof by negation," and his exodus from place to place allows him to occupy, in his mind, a privileged place of being "nowhere," as the forced exiles ensured his status as a martyr. Labadie convinced himself that he could attain a mystical unity with God through such negations—his beliefs consecrated by other peoples' condemnations of him and by his many displacements.

Howe depicts the Labadists in Maryland themselves as likewise succumbing to negation, to an increasingly marginalized existence defined by their religious beliefs. However, if Jean de Labadie sought out "a proof by negation," a banishment that led him to nowhere and that was fueled by his own arrogance, the Labadists of Maryland pursued a spiritual life of self-abnegation and ascetic denial that seemed ultimately unsustainable. James describes Labadists adhering to a communal division of labor in

which some "were in charge of the laundry, others of the cooking; others again were nurses and physicians" (16). The shared policies that bound the Labadists together reached extreme levels of austerity and regulation: "To such minute detail did the system extend . . . that a register was kept of the number of pieces of bread and butter consumed at a meal" (James 16). Howe, for her own part, documents a corresponding, ever-increasing goal of asceticism of the Labadist colony, one whose end point is an extreme negation:

> Great emptiness as
> simple as that went
> So straight before—
> had not been able
> then not being idle
> Went absent away (*Souls* 45)

The negative phrasing here provides an index of ascetic deprivation or starkness as the Labadists practice their utopian ideals of renunciation. The aim of "not being idle" speaks to the community's valued system of work and combines with a goal to attain a pared-down existence of simplicity to the point of "[g]reat emptiness." Howe further punctuates her account of New Bohemia with an ultimate statement of nothingness, in which all things "[w]ent absent away."

The formidable nothingness pursued by the Labadists' colony provides the opportunity to witness a stronger dystopian turn in Howe's poem, for one might easily construe such emptiness as dystopian rather than utopian. Elsewhere in "Souls of the Labadie Tract," Howe will designate the Labadist colony a "civil lacunae" whose existence is a void, obscured "as if /in [the] dark" (38). In line with a dystopian interpretation, Howe raises the premise of a negated or empty space within the context of religious faith and remarks upon its paucity:

> Now faith is not what we
> hereafter have we have a
> world resting on nothing (*Souls* 46)

The lines read dejectedly, as if the purpose of faith becomes lost, unimportant or irrelevant to a "world resting on nothing." It remains ambiguous if Howe speaks "now" of her own time period or that of the

Labadists. At the very least, Howe seems to address the defunct status of the Labadist colony, its descent into nonexistence. The subsequent lines imply such a dystopian reading in which the mundane world overwhelms spiritual faith, as Howe writes that "it is empty /reality we cannot escape" (*Souls* 46). The Labadists, of course, did succumb to the trappings of reality and a very real fate of no longer being extant. Indeed, by 1727, the Labadist "community [in Maryland] dwindled into extinction" (James 40). The dissolution of the Labadist colony signals a dystopian end to the utopian premises upon which New Bohemia was based, and the promise of a utopian existence, despite a system of ascetic practices and a retreat from the rest of society, proved ultimately to be out of reach.

If the failure of the Labadist colony and the dystopian conclusion of utopian plans are major concerns of "Souls of the Labadie Tract," Howe gives equal consideration to a resurrection of utopian potential that arises from the dissolution—or the negation—of the Labadist community. Failure thus significantly marks a once-intact will for a better society, and Howe seeks to recuperate in her poem this utopian promise of the Labadist tract, for Howe views the Labadists' efforts to create an ideal society as having implications for her own time period and for the American future. Relating the Labadists' era and her own, Howe infers, in a sort of short hand, that there is indeed a connection between herself and the Labadists: "*from* into the way leads *to*" (*Souls* 36). Howe consequently entreats the Labadists to speak for them, couching the matter in terms of a poetic vocation:

> Authorize me and I act
> what I am I must remain
> only suffer me to tell it (*Souls* 36–7)

Howe asks to be sanctioned, and her poem becomes a chronicle of a place and a community, so that the Labadists' communal history may be imaginatively told once more. Howe's charge is to start anew, as she attempts to resurrect a Labadist colony whose fate had hitherto remained "predestined /to remain obscure" (*Souls* 38).

Norman Finkelstein has remarked that the "premise of much of Howe's poetry is that the spirits have fled or have been driven away; the *space* of the writing has been desanctified and must again be made, if not holy, then at least welcoming and open to the spirit's return" (*Mount Vision* 115). While Howe certainly does concern herself with the spiritual significance

of specific sites, Howe's relation to place—particularly in "Souls of the Labadie Tract" and *The Midnight*—is arguably equally as utopian as it is sacred. Howe's retelling of the Labadist colony is an account that foregrounds not only the spiritual nature of the Labadist "souls" but also a utopian vision that has bearing, for Howe, on the American nation as a symbol of political liberty as well. There is precedent in Howe's work for a local history to take on larger, national significance. Fiona Green has argued that, in *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, Howe "finds herself caught up in a larger plot, the making of the nation" (85). On the first page of *Secret History*, as Green observes, Howe truncates the nation's name, substituting "Americ" for America so as to characterize the nation as incomplete: "the way forward is signposted by the name that lies unfinished at the end of the first block of text. 'Americ' signifies a nation in the process of formation, and precisely because it is unfinished, that name offers the promise of progress" (87).

In "Souls of the Labadie Tract," Howe likewise concerns herself with a narrative of national progress: the utopian space that Howe depicts begins in rural Maryland, but by the poem's end, Howe enlarges her scope to create a fantastic, utopian vision—a symbolic mapping—that encompasses the whole of the United States. To effect such a dynamic vision of the United States, Howe employs a series of references to trees as strong, natural symbols or signposts that embody the spirit and dynamic of utopia itself, even in the wake of the Labadist colony's demise. The trees in "Souls of the Labadie Tract," moreover, represent what Howe envisions as the utopian potential running through American history, encapsulating both a utopian drive that once belonged to the Labadist tract and a still possible hope for the American future.

The first tree reference is the poem's epigraph, a quotation of Stevens' "The Hand as a Being," that brings an early sense of the fantastic into the poem: "The wind had seized the tree and ha, and ha" (*Souls* 25). Such fantastic qualities of Steven's tree certainly prepare for the Labadist souls who speak throughout the poem, but Howe's selection for her epigraph also relates the utopian dynamic that once powered the Labadist community. The prospect of a brisk wind moving the limbs of a tree seems normal, even commonplace, yet it is Stevens' ascribing a voice or daemonic mirth to the aggressive wind, something suggestive of a supernatural energy, that makes the scene seem extraordinary. When Howe's epigraph is taken in the context of the poem's other tree figures—both of which place the Labadist colony as a historical utopian site and as a utopian

beacon for the American future—the energized tree within Howe's text assumes implicit political implications. Howe will, in her poem, recurrently figure the tree as a site of utopian will, an entity of a dynamic force, and though the Stevens quote at first seems an abstruse beginning to the "Souls of the Labadie Tract," the tree references, in aggregate, speak powerfully to a political and utopian vitality.

The Labadie Poplar is the next arboreal reference expressive of a utopian drive, and it surfaces toward the close of "Souls of the Labadie Tract," as Howe, in her role as adjunct poet of the Labadists, regards a lone tree in the landscape:

> That's the "Labadie Poplar"
> Labadists—New Bohemia
> little is otherwise known
> Our secret and resolute woe
> Carolled to our last adieu
> Our message was electric (*Souls* 69)

As throughout the rest of the poem, Howe alternates between her own voice and those of the Labadist souls, merging her own history with that of the Labadists. Were it not for the poplar, the little known Labadist colony would be easily overlooked, a secret of history readily dismissed. Howe's preface to the "Souls of the Labadie Tract" explains the significance of the poplar: "In 1795, Dennis Griffith's landmark map of Maryland noted a 'lappadee poplar' at the northern extremity of the Labadie Tract. It was the one singled out on the entire map of the state" (24). Howe here seems to luxuriate in an anecdote—and its alternate spelling of Labadie—about the sole cartographic indication of New Bohemia and the Labadie tract, and she constructs her own poem, with its several historical references, to operate itself like the Labadie poplar, a marker and signpost of a once vibrant utopian community. If Howe's poem is a final marker, one that adopts the voices of the Labadist souls to sing or carol a "last adieu," an electric, spirit-driven message of faith, obedience, and communal existence, then the "Souls of the Labadie Tract" is a poem in which Howe reconstructs the purpose of a utopian end. That the Labadist's message was "electric," moreover, recalls Stevens' wind-animated tree; both the Labadie poplar and the tree from "The Hand as a Being" register Howe's determined desire to represent the utopian imagination in terms of a dynamic, yet unrealized, energy.

Howe's last tree reference arises from an intricate allusion to a seventeenth-century text, Thomas Campion's *The Squires' Masque*, and squarely marks Howe's interest in a wider American narrative of regeneration. At the end of *The Squires' Masque*, an allegorical "America" who, amidst a pageant of other actors dressed continents (Europe, Asia, and Africa), enters in the colors of the mulberry tree. Howe, in her quotation of the masque, builds on Campion's brief description, and her America, no less allegorical than his, exists as a dynamic, fantastic and utopian political state, premised upon freedom:

> "America in a skin coat
> the color of the juice of
> mulberries" her fantastic
> cap full of eyes will lead
> our way as mind or ears
> Goodnight goodnight (*Souls* 70)

Though the actors in Campion's masque depict continents and not nations, Howe is concerned here with a national image of America. She isolates America as a singular and fantastic entity, with "a cap full of eyes," declaring that America, a nation with democratic, if not outright utopian, imperatives "will lead /our way." Howe's use of the future tense here is significant, not only as she marks the revolutionary qualities of democratic principles but also hints at the incomplete and unrealized potential of America's ideals of equality and liberty.

Howe's utopian poetic project is a recuperative one, striving to grasp the otherworldliness—or, in other words, the seeming impossibility—of the utopian ideal. Though the Labadist colony in Maryland may have come to an end relatively quickly and may have been ill-executed or conceived, Howe seeks to uphold the dynamic that sparked the founding of an American utopian project, and distill its hopeful promise, for Howe believes it is the same impulse or imaginative force that will necessarily drive future utopian efforts. The lesson of the failure of the Labadist colony is that a failed utopian movement does not merely point to what does not work but illuminates what stands to be corrected and what could work going forward. To construe the Labadist community at New Bohemia as solely a failure is to subscribe to a point of view in which utopia is not possible. Theodor Adorno, in his conversation with Bloch about the prospects for utopia, warns against such a delimiting view

toward social change, in which the potential for utopia become quickly cast as impossible: "all humans deep down, whether they admit it or not, know that [utopia] would be possible or [society] could be different. . . . At the same time, the social apparatus has hardened itself against people, and thus, whatever appears before their eyes all over the world as attainable possibility, as the evident possibility of fulfillment, [instead] presents itself to them as radically impossible" (*Utopian Function* 4). Howe gleans from the Labadist colony a model for what is radically possible, embracing, despite the Labadist's failures, the idea that the world could be different.

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Howe's *The Midnight*, like the "Souls of the Labadie Tract," pursues questions of failure and loss as they relate to the utopian imagination, and a key purpose for Howe is to address what is possible—what might survive as utopian potential—amidst setbacks to aesthetic projects with defined social aspirations and purpose. The utopian implications of *The Midnight* come into sharper relief in those sections of the book devoted to the life and work of Fredrick Law Olmsted, whose career and existence offer Howe an opportunity to explore an artistic vision realized in the face of deprivation, loss and failure. As Howe chronicles the trajectory of Olmsted's professional career as a landscape architect, she notes that much of what drives him is a reckoning with the loss of his mother, a void that he tries to fill with a communion with nature and his ability to design landscapes. The matter of deprivation, though, extends beyond Olmsted's mourning his mother to questions concerning the realization of utopia, as Howe frames her depiction of Olmsted in terms of the diminishment of his design plans. Olmsted's social vision to build a beautiful park in the city of Buffalo succumbs to urban sprawl and economic downturn, a negative condition that Howe correlates with the general decline of Buffalo's once vibrant Golden age of architecture and industry. Howe's account of the city of Buffalo in *The Midnight* draws on dystopian imagery, yet out of the various scenes of ruination and municipal neglect arises Howe's premise that a hidden utopian potential remains within sections of a vanquished cityscape, ready to be revealed and brought to life.

The revelation of the utopian within what seems lost, failed or empty, is, according to Howe, ultimately the vocation of the artist, a point which Howe is keen to demonstrate in the Olmsted's work and in her own poetry. In so doing, Howe recognizes that the intersections between death and creativity do not obtain solely in Olmsted's art: alongside the sections on

Olmsted's mourning of his mother, Howe will recount her own mother's passing as well as her mother's influence on her artistic process. The sections on Olmsted in *The Midnight* thus become a meditation loss and failure, the creative response to it, and the negative conditions from which the utopian imagination might spring, particularly as Howe correlates deprivation with artistic production in Olmsted's life and her own. Implicit in *The Midnight* is a correspondence between the growth of the artist and utopian longing, as Howe conveys that utopian efforts must be sustained despite previous failures just as the artist often must develop her art as a response to loss.

However much success Olmsted would enjoy in his distinguished career, Howe notes that Olmsted's first professional endeavors were frequently marked by mishap, with his business ventures prior to becoming a landscape architect being prone to blunder and failure. Olmsted was "an ex-farmer (hay, potatoes, turnips) who hadn't been able to make his farms pay, a travel writer . . . a partner in the failed publishing firm Dix Edwards & Company, and managing editor of Putnam's Monthly Magazine" (*Midnight* 128). Were it not for "the endorsement of Washington Irving," Howe explains, "Olmsted might not have been selected as superintendent in charge of construction of Central Park in New York City. The commissioners and engineers were looking for a 'practical' person, someone thoroughly fit for park development" (*Midnight* 127–8). Olmsted did not immediately give the impression of such a person. Howe wryly observes that Irving's support for Olmsted only came after the latter's role in "an amateur production of Richard Brinley Sheridan's *The Rivals*," which was a "comedy of impersonation and mistaken identity" (*Midnight* 128).

In contrast to Howe's description of Olmsted's bumbling, wayward business ventures, she presents Olmsted's interest in nature and landscape architecture as deep and sincere, stemming from his mother passing early in his life. As a youth, Olmsted would take long walks in nature to cope with his mother's death, and Howe postulates that that these walks played an integral role in his choice of profession: "I imagine myself peering into [Olmsted's] world to inquire how youthful solitary wanderings through the 'Connecticut valley and its confluents' prepared him to be a landscape architect . . . Did his love for nature split off from his relation to his mother?" (*Midnight* 84). Absence and loss are defining characteristics of Olmsted's relation to his mother, and Howe underscores the void that Olmsted experiences. Quoting from Olmsted's autobiographical account, Howe indicates the extent to which Olmsted's mother exists merely as an attenuated memory that both is and is not there:

> What there isn't
> My mother died while I was so young that I have but a tradition of memory rather than the faintest recollection of her. While I was a small school boy if I was asked if I remembered her I could say "Yes; I remember playing on the grass and looking up at her while she sat sewing under a tree." I now only remember that I did so remember her . . . (*Midnight* 66–7)

Framing Olmsted's own words with the negative phrase "What there isn't," Howe heightens the sense of Olmsted's deprivation and emphasizes the tenuous nature of Olmsted's memory. Olmsted possesses, in his words, only a "tradition of memory," which designates an act of remembering but is not an intact memory itself. The depth of negation in Olmsted's loss is, moreover, so striking, that it is redoubled; he can "only remember that [he] did so remember her."

Howe conceives of her own poetic and creative endeavors as revolving around similar emotions of loss, and the questions of maternal influence that Howe poses about Olmsted apply equally to her own life. Howe suggests that the complex relation between her mother and herself fuels her poetic and scholarly pursuits, arising, to some extent, from what she calls "the maternal Anglo-Irish disinheritance" (*Midnight* 66). Howe's mother, Mary Manning, was a constant traveler who "had crossed the Irish Sea several times and had crossed the Atlantic Ocean both ways twice," and Howe relates her own interest in "reformers, pilgrims, traveling preachers, strolling players, peddlers, pirates [and] captives" to her mother's itinerancy (*Midnight* 119). In *The Midnight*, Howe will portray herself as setting out to claim her rightful position as a poet, and she makes the role that maternal influence plays in her decision readily apparent: "Midnight is here. The Brig *Covenant*, I go in quest of my inheritance. . . . All who read must cross the divide—one from the other. Towards whom am I floating? I'll tie a rope around your waist if you say who you are. Remember we are travelling as relations" (*Midnight* 146). The parallels that Howe draws in *The Midnight* between her life and Olmsted's revolve around a negative state, around something that is missing, a maternal void, and by calling the creative impulse an "inheritance," Howe acknowledges that the aesthetic drive is made hers not just through parental bequest but also through the condition of loss. As Howe and Olmsted seek to transform the experience of loss into cultural forms, whether in terms of poetic works or landscape architecture, each enacts an imaginative plan that is

both artistic and utopian, Olmsted with his park designs that are socially progressive and Howe with poetry that seeks to illustrate a hidden utopian potential and to enact it.

The aesthetic imperative to reveal something hitherto hidden, to derive from the negative space of absence something present, is an idea that recurs frequently in *The Midnight* and brings together Howe's focus on loss, artistic production, and utopian potential. Howe's multiple references to book art and to a book's thin, transparent interleaf *The Midnight*, for example, are evocative of the simultaneous absence and presence that Howe incorporates into the text. The interleaf of a book, Howe writes, is a "mist-like transience" that functions like tracing paper, concealing and revealing at once (preface, *The Midnight*). Translucent and unobtrusive, the interleaf should be unremarkable, yet its presence is often conspicuous: "This thinnest blank sheet should be mute but it's noisily nondescript" (*Midnight* 57). For both Olmsted and Howe, the maternal void is something that is at once present and absent, and Howe isolates maternal absence as a fundamental constituent for both her artistic sensibility and Olmsted's.

Exemplifying the profound impact of maternal loss on one's being, Howe recalls from childhood a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* put on by her mother, in which "all the players were children" (*Midnight* 64). Howe underscores the play's thematic of absence: "*Dream* has been called a play of missing mothers because all the human ones in it are missing or dead" (*Midnight* 65). An absent figure is also central to the ballads that Howe would sing as a child, in which "a dead mother hears her children weep so she comes back" (*Midnight* 66). Common to Olmsted's and background and her own, Howe suggests, is the dream of or desire for recovery of what is gone, missing, or hidden, and her project within *The Midnight* will be to present the artistic process as restorative.

A corresponding revelation of the hidden or lost informs utopian ideals as well. A utopian vision of the future is often one in which what is absent or suppressed comes into being, and Howe's correlation of artistic production with the overcoming of loss or with the recuperation of what is absent has consonance with the utopian drive. As David Harvey writes,

> Utopian dreams in any case never entirely fade away. They are omnipresent as the hidden signifiers of our desires. Extracting them from the dark recesses of our minds and turning them into a political force for change

> may court the danger of the ultimate frustration of those desires. But better that, surely, than giving in to the . . . craven and supine fear of expressing and pursuing alternative desires at all. (*Spaces of Hope* 195)

Harvey's argument that utopian desires linger, and remain dormant, until they are unearthed again, reads as a description of a drive similar to the recuperative impulse that Olmsted experiences at his mother's passing. Olmsted's search, as Howe suggests, for what is hidden or absent is fundamental to his creative drive, yet this same principle of recovery lays the groundwork for understanding the utopian dimensions of Olmsted's work as well. Olmsted envisions the plans for his socially progressive landscape design in Buffalo in what is absent, a result, Howe implies, of Olmsted's ability to see lucidly—and to resurrect—what is not there.

Howe's anecdote from 1868 about Olmsted's selection of the site of the city park while touring Buffalo with William Dorsheimer, Lieutenant Governor of New York, is telling of the power of the imagination—whether artistic or utopian—to imagine potential within a negated, seemingly empty space. Initially, the industrialized urban space of Buffalo inhibits the group from envisioning a beautiful park, as "rapid growth in the bleak industrial city . . . had shut from sight whatever impressive views of the lake and the Niagara River its citizens once enjoyed" (*Midnight*, 62). Howe, though, dramatizes Olmsted's eventual decision for the park's location as a triumphant narrative of discovery and reimagining:

> A municipal system in the form of small open spaces and squares connected by wide roads and driveways already encircled the city; he didn't see anything suitable for a larger public gathering place until they came to a rise crossed by a creek three and a half miles from City Hall in what was then rolling farmland. "Here is your park almost ready-made," the landscape architect is rumored to have said looking back at the downtown area. (*Midnight* 62–3)

For Olmsted, the desire for a proper location for a municipal park relies upon an intrinsic design already existent in nature. Howe's quotation of Olmsted's key phrase, "Here is your park almost ready-made," corresponds closely to the aesthetics of absence that Howe has outlined in *The Midnight*. The anecdote pointedly relates that Olmsted's creative vision for the park arises from what is not yet there: the park itself, and

its utopian purpose as a remedy for rapid industrialization, remains hidden until engaged by the principles of Olmsted's landscape design.

At the core of Olmsted's design was a forward thinking, egalitarian philosophy intent on serving utopian ends. Olmsted and his partner Calvert Vaux won the competition to plan New York City's Central Park in 1858 with an entry entitled "Greensward," a design that entailed socially progressive ideals. "For Olmsted, the power of natural beauty lay in its social influence as well as aesthetic pleasure. An artistically designed landscape would provide a refreshing antidote to the city's competitive pressures and dreary buildings . . . " (Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 131). By designing Central Park, Olmsted aimed "to supply to the hundreds of tired workers . . . a specimens of God's handiwork that shall be to them, inexpensively, what a month or two in . . . the Adirondacks is . . . to those in easier circumstances" (Olmsted 239). Olmsted's investment in improving the lives of the working class was not faultless and, at times, even bordered on paternalism, particularly as he thought the role of gentleman was to develop the cultural tastes and attitudes of the poor. However, his ultimate vision for society and for the planning of parks was progressive. Albert Fein writes, "Olmsted sought to adapt Utopian Socialism to American conditions and to a Jeffersonian tradition of democracy," and his chief target were the societal ills brought about by capitalism (Fein, 18). Toward such an end, Olmsted considered his work "as the formal expression of a belief in a self-regulating society. In this scheme of things, planners would address themselves to social needs and physical functions unfulfilled by the marketplace" (Fein 23).

The utopian elements of Olmsted's urban planning have relevance for the way in which *The Midnight* as a whole develops its depiction of social space. In contrast to the Howe's exploration of the "founding and early history of Buffalo" in *Frame Structures, The Midnight* chronicles a later time period in Buffalo as it becomes a flourishing center of industry (Perloff 425). Howe focuses on Buffalo's rich architectural tradition and locates within Buffalo's prosperous history a one-time city of the future whose industrial machinery and equipment distinguished it from all others:

> Buffalo is sometimes called "the elevator capital of the world" because so many grain elevators (General Mills, Kellog, Agway, Pillsbury, Cargill Electric, Cargill Superior, Marine "A," Lake & Rail, Concrete Central) in dignified, if advanced decay, are concentrated along several southwest city blocks down by the Buffalo River near the Skyway (to Lackawanna). (*Midnight* 137–8)

In tracing Buffalo's prosperity, its hopeful, utopian magnitude, Howe connects the city with other utopian movements—art schools and social movements that Buffalo itself helped in some part to inspire: "Between 1913 and 1930 [the grain elevators and concrete silos] were an inspiration to Modernist Bauhaus architects including Gropius and Le Corbusier" (*Midnight* 138). Walter Gropius indeed admired American grain elevators and factory buildings and extolled their magnitude and artistic design: "Compared with the rest of Europe, Germany seems to have taken a considerable stride ahead in the field of artistic factory-building, but America, the home of industry, possesses some original majestic constructions which far outstrip anything of a similar kind achieved in Germany . . . The totally modern workshops of the North American firms almost bears [sic] comparison with the buildings of Ancient Egypt" (54–5). For Howe, the factories of Buffalo contain a future once promised in the past and provide a compelling alternative to Buffalo's touristic and most famous natural site: "when poets, especially poets from abroad, come to read we like to show them something besides Niagara Falls, so we drive them by what buildings remain from the transitional phase of Buffalo industry—otherwise known as the Golden Age of Buffalo Architecture (1890–1929)" (*Midnight* 138).

Howe's portrait of Buffalo's history, though, would not be complete without reference to the city's economic downturn and the sapping of its utopian potential. Certainly, for all of the promise of Buffalo's past, the specter of failure follows conspicuously behind Howe's depiction of Buffalo and its Golden Age of Architecture. Howe conveys that some of these same buildings now serve as dystopian monuments, exhibiting the regional loss of jobs, economic power, and social prominence in the Buffalo of the present. Howe thus remains mindful of the relatively quick slippage between a city's robust health and its moments of decline, and she contemplates the tenuous relationship between the utopian and dystopian. Howe's tour of Buffalo's past in *The Midnight* consequently takes a decidedly dystopian turn as she describes how the once-flourishing silos and factories have now become "the disheveled and derelict Concrete Central" (*Midnight* 138). As Howe suggests, the travel through Buffalo's history is a descent fit for Orpheus, and the reader is cautioned against looking back: "Destructive ecologies, human chauvinism, the mores of hucksters, the rattle of gold in the colossal social field. How far back in history can you look?" (139).

Nowhere is this precarious slide to the dystopian more apparent than in the city of Buffalo's abandoned New York Central Terminal, an Art Deco

building and once vibrant train station of the New York Central Railroad. Howe chronicles New York Central Terminal's history, remarking on its rapid deterioration:

> During the war it was used as a terminal for troop trains. Now not even AMTRAK is interested. The vaulted office tower is empty. We found ourselves in a vast filthy brick hall, vaulted in the Roman Bath style. The arched windows were broken or opaque with grime. Silence in such a space became noise in itself. Signs around us telling no one where to go, what to buy, where to pick up baggage. Clock after clock, all stopped.
>
> TICKETS TICKETS TICKETS TICKETS TICKETS in block letters across one stone wall over the empty booths where ticket sellers once stood. Elegant letters cut into the stone. (*Midnight* 142)

The defunct building alone illustrates the passage from a more thriving era, yet Howe describes the dilapidated architectural and material details from the space to underscore the station's lack of utility, a negative condition in which "not even AMTRAK is interested." Observations of the vaulted ceiling designed in a "Roman Bath style" conjure a sense of imperial decadence, one that contrasts sharply with New York Central Terminal's futuristic design of Art Deco and the accelerated speed of travel on railroad trains. New York Central Terminal turns even more dystopian as Howe extends her description of it: "Silence in such a space became noise in itself." Howe infers, moreover, that the terminal also succumbs to a negation, with "[s]igns around us telling no one where to go." The final dystopian attribute of New York Central Terminal arises as it becomes apparent that the future and "Clock after clock, [are] all stopped."[1]

Howe's dystopian turn in *The Midnight*, her account of Buffalo's failed industrial-era dreams, records a real historical period of decline, yet for all of these setbacks to the utopian drive in practice, Howe still aims to represent a utopian potential hidden within the moments of failure. Howe implies that the dissolution of Buffalo's industrial Golden Age ought not to be read solely as a failure but as an indication of a viable utopian imagination that can be revived in the future. The key for such a revival is to read the negative characteristics of utopian texts appropriately, and, particularly for *The Midnight*, to read Howe's recurrent negative statements and dystopian imagery paradoxically, as an indication of the utopian imagination.

The dystopian elements of *The Midnight* betray their relation to the utopian when considered in the context of the genre of the critical dystopia. Critical dystopias present the despairing conditions of society ultimately to articulate a path toward utopia and do so by negating a negative depiction of society. As Moylan writes, the critical dystopia "is precisely a textual form that leads *toward* Utopia by way of a dialectical negation, for it negotiates the conflict between Utopia and Anti-Utopia" (191–2). If anti-utopian texts are works that are hostile to, or disparaging of, the concept of utopia, the critical dystopia by contrast offers an intermediary position between the utopian and anti-utopian that not only depicts oppressive or distressed social conditions but also works by sheer force of its critical portrait of society to diagnose social problems and create desire for utopian outcomes. Howe's *The Midnight* in this manner endeavors to provide a negative image consistent with the critical dystopia. Buffalo's New York Central Terminal and its Concrete Central function together as a negative model, an emblem of a once thriving industrial age that could not sustain its once seemingly boundless prosperity nor provide a utopian existence for all. Buffalo's rapid industrialization and manufacturing-based economy, then, were not in the end an answer for social amelioration, but Howe distills from this episode of Buffalo's history an imaginative and creative impulse that, channeled properly, could lead to the realization of utopian ends.

The utopian impulse that Howe fosters in *The Midnight*, like that of the critical dystopia, derives from an act of negation, in which a negative state of deprivation loss, or failure, yields inspiration for change and a path toward utopian ends. Howe articulates her vision for the proper use of negation at the end of *The Midnight*, in a section entitled "Kidnapped," and she returns to the subject artistic development and youth, as it relates to her work and to Olmsted's. At the start of "Kidnapped," Howe introduces the *Fushikaden*, a scholarly writing on Noh drama developed by Zeami Motokiyo, whose teachings discuss the necessity of youthful maturation for artistic performance. In the *Fushikaden*, subtitled *The Transmission and Style of the Flower*, Zeami outlines the characteristics of Noh by comparing acting methods to a flower: "the Flower consists of being thorough in the various kinds of role-playing, making great efforts, and understanding the perception of unique [performance]" (Zeami 126). Finding the Flower "difficult to put into words," however, Zeami turns to negative phrasing to refine and best describe its principles (105). For Zeami, the ultimate lesson of the Flower "is contained in the statement, 'If it is hidden, it is the Flower, if it is not hidden, it is not the Flower'" (134).[2]

> Howe's citation of the *Fushikaden* in "Kidnapped" focuses primarily on the section dealing with a young person's understanding of the nature of art:
>
> [Zeami] said that a boy's voice begins to achieve its proper pitch at eleven or twelve, only then can he begin to understand the Noh.
>
> But this flower is not the true flower not yet. (*Midnight* 149)

Not yet a "true flower," the young person only slowly comes to an understanding of Noh aesthetics. Zeami's phrase ("But this flower is not the true flower not yet") corresponds with both Howe's emphasis upon Olmsted's youthful initiation into landscape design and her recognition of inheriting her artistic drive from her mother. The saying also concisely encapsulates Howe's aesthetic principles of negation, in which a state of deprivation or loss must itself be negated and overcome, leading to the revelation of something hitherto hidden or unrealized.

Howe more directly connects the *Fushikaden* to her own life and aesthetic development in "Kidnapped" as she pivots to a childhood memory of following her mother's advice for a reading competition at school: "1926. Mary Manning having wandered the Bronte moors in Yorkshire, carries a copy of Matthew Arnold's *Scholar Gypsy* home to Dublin . . . Now it is 1948. I am to read aloud the last three paragraphs of *Wuthering Heights* for the sixth grade reading contest at Buckingham School, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The book is her choice. Poetry is our covenant" (*Midnight* 149). Howe juxtaposes her life with her mother's, tracing her Mother's literary "steps" with her own and connecting mother and daughter in the "covenant" of poetry. Adopting a floral metaphor as in the *Fushikaden*, Howe subsequently relates her maturation to a cowslip flower, whose growth patterns suggest the influence Howe's mother had on her:

> *The Gate*
> A double cowslip bears one flower out of another. It
> remains in pastures long after the grass has been eaten away
> a stage name under the true one
> Mind the hidden (*Midnight* 150)

As both a biological and artistic progenitor, Mary Manning is a life force behind her daughter's works, a flowering of creativity intent on renewing itself.[3]

In addition to the figure of the flower, Howe relies on the image of the pasture, itself a negated space, decimated and "eaten away," whose

impoverished state is, nevertheless, the source of regeneration. The depleted, overrun pasture from which the cowslip emerges speaks to Howe's depiction of the city of Buffalo and the utopian promise embedded within its spaces. As Howe instructs, we are to "[m]ind the hidden," in the case of artistic inheritance and lineage, in which a cowslip flower might beget another one, yet her instruction to see what is hidden, also implies that we must seek out the once-vibrant, utopian potential of a city like Buffalo. It is difficult to see, to recognize, the prospects for regeneration within a compromised, if not depleted, landscape, but Howe assures us of its possibility:

> These days the Scajacuada Expressway rudely interrupts Olmsted's nineteenth-century Rousseauian nature-house-community theory, especially at rush hour. Nevertheless, this particular public gathering place maintains an aura of unaccommodating emptiness different from other more passively liberating parks or artificial enclaves designed by Olmsted, Vaux and Company . . . if only in the way the treetops echo the as yet unpastured insurrection of clouds and sky
>
> so openly and secretly (*Midnight* 129)

The necessities of contemporary existence—of urban planning, arterial expressways, and the transport of commuters—jut up against idealism of Olmsted's designs. The dystopian elements of this scene afford, however, a view onto the utopian. A heavily trafficked thoroughfare hardly seems anyone's idea of utopia, yet Howe distills from the cityscape prospects for a utopian ideal. Despite being rudely interrupted, Olmsted's park effects a complexly negative space, full of "an aura of unaccommodating emptiness," a void which "ech[oes] the as yet unpastured insurrection of clouds and sky." The image that Howe evokes here is an abstruse and convoluted one, yet it holds out reverence for what is not there, for negative spaces like these, "so openly and secretly," contain the possibility for renewal. As Howe has urged throughout *The Midnight*, though, such negativity is the necessary precondition for inspiration, whether artistic or utopian.

It is not Howe's purpose in *The Midnight* to offer up a complete, fully rendered vision of utopian society; instead it is important that she illustrates that the utopian imagination is ongoing and that this imaginative work can best be construed in the negative. Her work is attentive to absence and to the possibilities that emptiness might yield. The virtue of the utopian text lies, as Fredric Jameson contends, not in its

fanciful and prescriptive presentation of a perfect world but in its repudiation of what limits the imagination: "The Utopian form itself is the answer to the ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system. But it asserts this by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be after the break" (*Archaeologies* 232). The utopian text thus fulfills its purpose by spurring the imagination beyond what blocks it, working to negate the idea that a better future is *not* available. Howe thus appropriately implores us in *The Midnight* to see—like Olmsted in search of his park's location—what is not yet there.

Contained within the "Souls of the Labadie Tract" and *The Midnight* is Howe's impulse to imagine the future and to sketch out the possibilities for an American utopia inching progressively toward a perfected society. To reiterate, perhaps needlessly, Howe is not a science fiction writer, despite her interest in, and speculations about, the future, yet it is tempting to construe Howe's engagement with utopian societies and the imagined future as approaching science fiction. Gerald Bruns has said that for Howe, "the library is a kind of time machine—except that the present does not (just) return to the past; rather the past is always with us" (44).

A time-traveler who seeks knowledge about America's present and its future through its past, Howe portrays herself—to continue the science fiction discourse further—as a cyborg-like figure in *The Midnight*, who accesses archives and adjoins herself to arcane machines that are at once dystopian and utopian: "[Microfilm] is a retrograde medium doomed by computers to extinction. Microform machines are hypnotic, pale-eyed, anonymous. 'Put up, or shut up' is what they could be saying. As I scroll a spool of film up and down, forward and back across the mechanical apparatus" (*Midnight* 136–7). Howe has set herself a task that Emerson reserved for the poet in nature, when he writes: "There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet" (*Nature* 38). A variation upon Emerson's sublime "transparent eyeball" (*Nature* 39), Howe situates herself—in an altogether different type of wilderness—in front of the Microform machine, scanning for the future and declaring: "I am a detective, an editor, a director, a watching eye, " and it is through such scrutiny she sees the potential for a different America hidden in our midst (*Midnight* 137).

Notes

1. It should be noted that the dystopian turn of New York Central Terminal is not the building's final legacy. In 1997, a nonprofit organization, the Central Terminal Restoration Corporation, took ownership of New York Central Terminal and began efforts to return the historical landmark to a vibrant state. The plan for the site is to create a center for new business and transportation and to secure a part of Buffalo's cultural history through a multimillion dollar endowment.
2. Zeami also approaches his explanation of Noh techniques by employing nondualistic principles and quoting Buddhist texts, like the Yuima Sutra, where "it says, 'Good and bad are not two. The correct and the heretical are the same'" (138). For the connection between nondualism and negative theology, see J.P. Williams, *Denying Divinity*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
3. *The Gate*, in fact, is the name of the theater where Mary Manning and Susan Howe, at different times in their careers, each performed.

CHAPTER 3

And Be Whole Again: Antiphony, Deprivation, and the "Not-Yet" Place of Utopia in Nathaniel Mackey's *Splay Anthem*

Abstract The focus of this chapter is the imagined world that Nathaniel Mackey creates in *Splay Anthem*, a book-length poem that depicts a devastated urban landscape traversed by a lost band of travelers. Lagapa argues, however, that the book's dystopian spaces, strewn with amputated bodies and beset by widespread social deprivation, unexpectedly hold the key for utopian realization. The potential for utopian social change, Lagapa contends, is encapsulated in Mackey's repeated use of the phrase "not yet," a negative construction that recalls the importance that Ernst Bloch places on anticipation in utopian thought. Mackey's travelers, having "not yet" arrived, find themselves perpetually cut off from their destination, yet they continue to anticipate an end to debilitating social conditions as they seek a path toward utopia.

Keywords Nathaniel Mackey · Utopia · Negation · Dystopia · Ernst Bloch Negation

Nathaniel Mackey's poems are testaments to a poet's interest in testing reality, of asking skeptical questions to comprehend the world as it is. For Mackey's *Splay Anthem*, which aspires, albeit equivocally, to be a utopian text, the prevailing tenor of the work—that of skepticism—lends itself to a consideration of the present conditions of society and the ways in which

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utopian goals might be realized. A disjointed narrative that courses through *Splay Anthem* is that of a wandering quest, undertaken by what Mackey calls "a lost tribe of sorts, a band of nervous travelers," whose wayward and often fantastic journey through the book's dystopian spaces is seemingly a search for utopia (SA x). As the group—a contingent of the of the West African tribe of the Andoumboulou—treks to numerous places, from real countries and cities, like Jamaica, Greece, Benin, Paris, and Los Angeles, to imaginary and fictional locales like Lit City, Lotus Coast, and Hallelujah Hill, they routinely struggle to locate themselves. The Andoumboulou travelers, for instance, realize at one point that they are not where they should be and express concern about "not having gone far enough" as they find themselves "west of New /Not Yet" (SA 47).

Here, as with many scenes within *Splay Anthem*, a pattern of repeated negative phrasing emerges in which the travelers determine where they are by explicitly establishing where they are not. So suffused with negations is *Splay Anthem* that the travelers even self-reflexively question, in a metapoetic moment, the genre of which they take part: "it wasn't an epic we were in" (SA 78). The refusal by the travelers to claim the epic as a genre illustrates the desire to adhere to a process of negation, to assess the reality of the moment, and to rebut all that the term "epic" might erroneously imply about their quest. One could usefully extrapolate from the travelers' negative assertion about being in an epic a premise that holds for all of *Splay Anthem*: the use of negations represents a concerted effort on Mackey's part to develop a skeptical stance within his poetry, one in which the structure of reality—why the world is as it is—might be continuously evaluated and put into question.

The recurrent negative statements that Mackey employs, however, do not simply emerge from an indiscriminate impulse to reject. Indeed, the negations are not empty gestures of refutation but a rhetorical process of opposition and resolution, aimed at the consideration of where the characters—and, by extension, humankind—might stand, whether in the midst of a dystopian nightmare or on the path toward a utopian society. Mackey adopts this rhetorical mode of recursive negation to decry what is amiss in our existence, including economic disparity and social injustice, and to posit a way out of a strife-ridden human condition. The generative force behind Mackey's skepticism is a drive to improve the welfare of society, discern the best measures to do so, and thereby stake out the prospects for social change.

Shortly after the speaker's denial in *Splay Anthem* that he and his fellow travelers take part in an epic poem, he elaborates: "nose around though /we did, it wasn't that it was [an epic] or it wasn't" (SA 78). Though such equivocal disavowals and sequential negations would seem to lead to uncertainty and ambiguity, Mackey conceives of this process of negation as an important method of arriving at a multifaceted understanding of reality. Mackey describes his rhetorical mode as engaging in "a kind of erasure, [whereby a] statement backtracks or breaks off, ellipses abound, assertion and retraction volley, assertion and supplementation: addition, subtraction, revision, conundrum, nuance, amendment, tweak" (SA xi). As this extended explication itself illustrates, the discursive process that Mackey adopts in *Splay Anthem* is one in which assertions are made and retracted, statements are posited and negated, and utterances are introduced and revised—forming, as Norman Finkelstein puts it, a system of "counterpart/counterpoint" (*On Mount Vision* 192). The multiple retractions, erasures, and negations that Mackey engages in are nevertheless productive and purposeful: they are a means for the poet to advance an idea, call it into question, and offer up a new, subsequent proposition as a means of getting closer to the truth of social reality.

A resultant effect of Mackey's rhetorical revisions and negations is to illustrate the utopian drive as something suspended and unrealized but not necessarily unrealizable. Casting his articulation of the utopian in equivocal, negative terms, Mackey participates in what Ernst Bloch, in *The Principle of Hope*, calls the Not-Yet-Conscious: an anticipatory mindset that projects a utopian future. For Bloch, this utopian impulse is ever present but remains unachieved, an idea that Bloch explains in the idiosyncratic language that is characteristic of his writing:

> the astonishing fact remains…that the [utopian] dawning sticks fast in the Fixum, ultimately unnoted or clogged with What Has Been. A vast mental realm of the Not-Yet-Conscious, one that is constantly travelled, has so far remained undiscovered, or its discoveries have remain unnoticed. Similarly, a vast physical realm of the Not-Yet-Become, which forms the correlate of the Not-Yet-Conscious, remain[s] stationary . . . (141)

Bloch's use of negation here is essential to his argument, for Bloch predicates the conception of the utopian on a negative assertion—a "not-yet" proposition—to posit the incomplete progress toward social advancement. "Not-yet" thus names both the state of an imperfect society—stuck in a

pernicious, static reality—*and* the nascent or immanent force of utopian possibility. In a manner consistent with Bloch's formulation, Mackey composes *Splay Anthem* so that its negative rhetoric depicts an interstitial state, a not-yet place at once skeptical and hopeful and caught between present reality and the achievement of utopia.

Exemplifying the logic of the Not-Yet-Conscious or the Not-Yet-Become, negation is fundamental to *Splay Anthem*. Not only is there a preponderance of negative phrasing, but negation structures the book's dominant imagery: recurrent dystopian motifs of broken, wounded people, and devastated places will give way—if a negative social condition can itself be negated—to an aspiration for utopian wholeness. Of the two serial poems that comprise *Splay Anthem*, "Song of the Andoumboulou" and "Mu," it is the journey of the Andoumboulou that lends itself to such a quest for renewal and redemption, particularly as Mackey considers the Andoumboulou a "rough draft of human being" poised for reinvention (SA xi). Accordingly, toward the end of *Splay Anthem*, Mackey invokes references to birth and renewal that are common to creation myths so as to convey the possibilities for social rejuvenation embedded within the Andoumboulou's quest.[1] As the travelers pass through multiple scenes of social stasis and oppression, *Splay Anthem* will conclude with a demand for a new world and thereby push toward the not-yet-arrived, or what Finkelstein would term, the "redemptive, utopian vision arising at the far horizon" (*On Mount Vision* 191).

While Mackey is keen to explore the possibilities for expressing utopian impulses in *Splay Anthem*, he also remains somewhat dubious about facile literary utopias that too readily gloss over social problems. The phrase "not yet" thus also encapsulates the skepticism with which Mackey approaches his depictions of social conditions. As Mackey himself remarks, his poetry proceeds via a careful weighing of opposites, resulting in a recursive compositional mode marked as much by caution as optimism:

> Recursiveness can mark a sense of deprivation fostered by failed [social] advance, a sense of alarm and insufficiency pacing a dark, even desperate measure, but this dark accent or inflection issues from a large appetite or even a utopic appetite or, better – invoking Duke Ellington's neologism – a blutopic appetite. Seriality's mix of utopic ongoingness and recursive constraint is blutopic, an idealism shaped or shaded by blue, in-between foreboding, blue, dystopic apprehension of the way the world is. (SA xiv)

Finding inspiration in Ellington's term "blutopic," which connotes both the adversity that gave rise to African American Blues music and a release from those same hardships, Mackey's utopian poetics draw on and address the history of the African Diaspora. *Splay Anthem* thus stands as an imaginative and critical response of survival and perseverance, one that does not gloss over but speaks to the social problems of poverty, racism, and oppression—to *deprivation*, a key term in Mackey's critical essays—faced by the black community in the United States as well as the formerly colonized peoples in the Caribbean.

It is important to note that Mackey's utopian vision, however, is both specific and universal: *Splay Anthem* certainly speaks to the Atlantic slave trade and to the African Diaspora, but the book also encompasses a larger, worldwide view.[2] This explains why *Splay Anthem*'s depictions—of places and modes of travel—frequently take on fantastic and abstract qualities; Mackey seeks a utopian remedy that is grounded in local experiences but can also be generalized—abstracted and made universal—in its approach to global strife and the problems that now face humankind. Mackey's poetry, with its rendition of global and fantastic spaces, consequently seems a fitting example of what Jahan Ramazani has termed a transnational poetics. Such poetry, Ramazani argues, calls for a criticism that pursues "a *co*locational or *trans*locational approach to modernism, as also to postcolonialism, alert to how such art and literature interlace localities and nationalities with one another in a globally imagined space" (15). Though *Splay Anthem* draws on and represents social conditions specifically afflicting black and Caribbean communities, its storyline expands to encompass a global perspective so as to advance its vision for large-scale, collective political change.

From the outset, with the very title of *Splay Anthem*, Mackey signals both the sweeping, utopian implications of his book and his rhetorical mode of negation and assertion. Traditionally, an anthem is a song of religious devotion or praise sung antiphonally—that is, in alternating parts or responses. The back and forth, antiphonal structure of the anthem appropriately correlates to Mackey's poetics that tests alternative perspectives to social reality or the political status quo. Of course, an anthem, in its colloquial usage, is also a song of praise, as of a nation, and the larger, social implications of the word *anthem* reveal Mackey's desire for *Splay Anthem* to build toward the utopian. The meaning of the word *splay*—that which expands and spreads out or apart—is suggestive of the scope of utopia and its project of far-reaching social amelioration. Megan Simpson has previously underscored the communal, socially minded aspects of Mackey's writing,

demonstrating how his use of folk mythology in *Song of the Andoumboulou* raises the possibility of a "collective subjectivity" (39). While Simpson does not specifically identify Mackey's poetry as utopian, she does contend that his poetry promotes a "collective cross-cultural identity that would . . . move beyond the logics of 'us' and 'them' so often underlying current conceptions of literary as well as social multiculturalism" (52). *Splay Anthem*, I would argue, also inheres within its title and its pages a corresponding and specific impulse toward utopian collectivity. Constructing an antiphonal "response" to a bleak social and political reality, Mackey distills a utopian promise from the negative experiences of those who are downtrodden and from his skeptical belief that the world is not yet as it should be.

As a title, though, *Splay Anthem* is not solely affirmative, for it also prepares for the book's dystopian imagery, whose darkness and pessimism provide a stark counterpoint to the unchecked idealism of a naïve utopia. The adjectival "splay"—with its secondary meaning of something "awry"—importantly qualifies Mackey's anthem: his antiphonal song is not simply utopian and full of praise but is also dreary and dark. *Splay Anthem*'s many dystopian features include images of urban sprawl, crowded freeways and alienated citizens, and the Andoumboulou travelers frequently encounter a world of despair—evinced by an excess of consumerism, misery, and death.[3] The troubles that the band of travelers meet spur them forward on their quest, and their imperative is to be continuously on the move. *Splay Anthem* consequently follows a repetitive, cyclical pattern, in which the predominantly negative and dystopian journey that the travelers undertake is periodically offset by flickers of utopian promise. As the Andoumboulou travelers recurrently find themselves *not* where they want to be, they must traverse forbidding landscapes and locales and contend with scenes of deprivation as they pursue their utopian aspirations.

Mackey's repeated negations noticeably arise in his early descriptions of the travelers' wary attempts to navigate the dystopian spaces of *Splay Anthem*. As Mackey outlines the details of the travelers' quest, his use of negation at first indicates a vain attempt to coordinate direction. The voyage that the travelers undertake is often harried and haphazard:

> The sunken ship they at times
> took it they were on no sooner
> sank
> than sailed again (SA 23)

The initial, isolated negative utterance ("no sooner") records the propensity for things to go awry and introduces an ill-fated quality to the travelers' ventures. Uncertainty and precariousness abound: the ship on which they sail is itself a matter open to interpretation ("the sunken ship they . . . took it they were on") and is, moreover, a product of faulty magic—continually sinking and somehow sailing again. The travelers' destination likewise proves troublesome for being uncertain and indeterminate, an ambiguity that Mackey registers with more rhetorical negations:

> we the escaping
> they, calling out names no where
> we'd
> arrive would answer to, nowhere the
> louder
> we'd shout (SA 23)

The travelers appear lost, unsure of their way, and as they call out names of places to land, they receive no answer, becoming increasingly mired in nothingness. Mackey's negations here serve the primary purpose of chronicling the futility of the travelers' movements and their despair at being aimless: with no place and no "where" to arrive, the travelers become trapped in a condition of "nowhere," not yet able to locate themselves and stuck in an extreme state of disorientation.

Mackey's interest in dislocation and aimlessness connects his poetry to an earlier era of American modernism, in which a prevailing apprehension about the decline of society and a desire to return to a past sense of wholeness broadly prefigure Mackey's aesthetic and social concerns.[4] Indeed, any number of modernist poets—including H.D., Charles Olson, or William Carlos Williams, all of whom Mackey has referenced in his critical writings—could be identified as precursors informing the disoriented and confused quest of *Splay Anthem*. However, it is Robert Frost's "Directive" that provides an interpretive entry point into, if not outright influence upon, Mackey's portrayal of the wayward search of his travelers and the corresponding motifs of deprivation and redemption—a return to wholeness—that the quest summons. Frost's "Directive" is, like "Splay Anthem," an uncertain epic quest, the aim of which is to recuperate the source of life that once sustained a dilapidated town.

At the outset of "Directive," Frost ushers the reader away from the troubling present and into the past with an abrupt, startling imperative: "Back out

of all this now too much for us, /Back in a time made simple by the loss /Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off" (520). The subsequent lines, with their repeated negative descriptions of the surrounding environment, compound the puzzling nature of the quest: "There is a house that is no more a house /upon a farm that is no more a farm /and in a town that is no more a town" (520). Such negations hinder a clear conception of the poem's setting, and the reader might have difficulty charting a way through its landscape.

Ambiguity itself, though, is integral to the meaning of "Directive," functioning as one of the poem's central conceits. Frank Lentricchia, for instance, reads Frost's "Directive" as distinctly addressing the subject of confusion, particularly as Frost's initial directives or instructions "because of their ambiguous and even contradictory implications, lead not to action—as the rhetorician's language is calculated to prompt us—but to troubled and bewildered contemplation" (113). The act of reflection, a meditative working through of problems, is common to both "Directive" and *Splay Anthem*, as each poem pursues a quest for truth—for meaning beyond confusion. Toward this goal of apprehending reality, Frost and Mackey will each adhere to, and promote, a practice of skeptical questionings and a rhetorical mode of negation. Their common imperative is to remove doubt and seek clarity, even when surrounded by uncertainty.

Whereas Frost directs us to go back to a simpler place in the past, Mackey situates us in the history-laden present, and his negative utterances seek to clarify the immediate environment:

> Now neither Paris nor
> Peru was it we were in . . .
> We
> were in Jamaica, St. Ann's Bay,
> parish peril had to do with, perish
> we thought it was we heard. (SA 34)

Skeptical and negative questionings lead the Andoumboulou travelers to discern they have dreamily traveled beyond their previous destinations of Paris and Peru, yet the band's ability to locate themselves unmistakably in Jamaica does not remove all present confusion. The historical past encroaches upon the travelers' awareness as they misconstrue *perish* for *parish*, evoking thereby the violent deaths brought about by the slave trade of British colonial history in the district of St. Ann's Parish, Jamaica. Bewildering and horrifying, that history, Mackey implies, *must*

be reckoned with, and his travelers have the extraordinary power to hear atrocities too often erased out of nostalgic tourist accounts of Caribbean colonial history.[5]

Mackey's use of the phrase "parish peril," moreover, evokes the Grail legend and the Chapel Perilous, where Lancelot retrieved a sword and cloth with which he would heal the wounded Sir Meliot. The implication of the perilous encounter in Jamaica is that the travelers, despite their faltering missteps, possess heroic qualities that correspond to Lancelot's endeavors: the excursion through St. Ann's Bay allows the Andoumboulou travelers—and Mackey's poem—to call up and bear witness to history's wounds. As Paul Naylor observes, Mackey's poetry often chronicles "a culture dominated by the institutions of slavery" (596) and thereby "detail[s] the unequal dose of loss administered to people of African descent as a consequence of racist social practices" (597). Evoking the slave trade in *Splay Anthem* thus importantly links past with present, for the legacy of slavery manifests itself in much of the economic hardships and deprivation faced by the African American and Caribbean communities of today, and recognition of the past, Mackey contends, prepares for the understanding of the present.

While the quest narratives of both *Splay Anthem* and "Directive" present struggles with dislocation and confusion, both poems also display utopian leanings as each tracks the hope for renewal. In pursuit of such a redemptive end, "Directive" itself invokes the Grail Legend, though a bit ironically: Frost's speaker takes up a "broken drinking goblet like the Grail" stolen "from the children's playhouse" in order to drink from a nearby fountain and refresh himself (521). The wry espousal of the goblet's magic is—similar to the spells used to keep rocks steady in Frost's "Mending Wall"—an index of an adult playfulness. However, in the case of "Directive," the recourse to a child's imagination is also indicative of adult yearnings and responsibilities. As Lentricchia writes, "even as the children in play can transmute the shattered dishes into the fixtures of their magic world, so the adult, with examples of failure and suffering all around him, must transform what he sees into a better world: we really have no choice—we either recreate the world better than it is, or we live an unbearable existence" (119).

Reading "Directive" as encompassing the impulse to create a better world reveals the poem's utopian impulses and underscores, moreover, the gravity of its concerns. The tone of "Directive" does tend toward the

serious in its concluding lines, and drinking from the fountain serves as a metaphor for a restoration of the mind through contemplative thought. At the close of the poem, Frost instructs the reader: "Here are your waters and your watering place. /Drink and be whole again beyond confusion" (521). As Lentricchia argues, however, the imperative of "Directive" to be whole again is not fanciful wishing, but instead a matter of concerted mental work and skepticism, for the poem's lesson is valid "only when the projection of imagination's shapes of hope and desire is accompanied by a sober self-consciousness that will keep us in touch with ourselves and the limits of redemption, and keep us from projecting fantasy worlds . . . " (119). For Frost, wholeness as an ambition is dependent upon a "sober" or skeptical awareness, one that does not ignore the stark political realities of the present day but instead offers an incisive, skeptical critique to spur social change.

In *Splay Anthem*, such a reckoning with social problems manifests itself in the Andoumboulou travelers' passage through a series of dreary and troubled landscapes and the trouble they encounter on their journey. Though there is unmistakable advancement from one place to the next, Mackey puts the actual progress of the travelers into doubt, beset as they are by lethargy:

> City of Lag segued into city
> of So That. So that we on the
> Not yet Express rode ecstatic,
> rode but not rode so
> much as trudged, waded
> in
> stra-dust, wish's would be
> star tramped under our
> feet (SA 20)

Here, place and existential condition mirror each other: the listless travelers become equal to their environment, whether they visit City of Lag, a municipality synonymous with sluggishness or the "city of So That," a locale that seemingly embodies an apathetic adherence to what comes next. Mackey's negations further reinforce the feelings of lethargy, with any sensations of joy or ecstasy experienced on the "Not yet Express" skeptically revised for a more realistic description: "not rode so /much as

trudged." Utopia, furthermore, here remains a distant hope, an impossible destination, at least for now, evocative of a mere "wish's would be."

As the Andoumboulou travelers next arrive in Los Angeles, their troubles do not abate. Like the fictive places of *Splay Anthem*, the real spaces of Los Angeles reinforce the dystopian features of the book, as nightmarish scenes of overrun freeways and urban sprawl compound the bleak and despairing characteristics of the travelers' quest. Mackey's Los Angeles is not that of celebrities, continuously temperate days, and affluent neighborhoods but instead a disquieting, simulated space whose promise of prosperity and well-being dissipates quickly. The discrepancy between the social realities that Mackey explores and idealized conceptions of Los Angeles make it a particularly apt choice for Mackey's portrayal of an American dream deferred. As cultural geographer Edward Soja points out, Los Angeles promotes an image of itself as a space of entertainment and leisure, yet frequently conceals the hard work, lived experiences, and poverty of many of its inhabitants: "With exquisite irony, contemporary Los Angeles has come to resemble more than ever before a gigantic agglomeration of theme parks, a lifespace comprised of Disneyworlds . . . [wherein the] attractively packaged places for rest and recreation all cleverly hid[e] the buzzing workstations and labour processes which help keep it together" (246). For its part, *Splay Anthem* takes pains to offer insight into the drudging existence of the citizens of Los Angeles, as the Andoumboulou travelers take in the city from up on high, as if from Mt. Olympus:

> There we stood
> atop the world looking out at
> the world. L.A. it now was we
> were in . . .
> Inside each car someone bore the
> world away, each a fleeting guest
> whose going we lamented (SA 57)

Mackey adeptly acknowledges the split between dream and reality: the travelers' elevated perspective—and corresponding feelings of being "atop the world"—is diminished by each mundane repetition of the word *world*. The world, but not its troubles, is being borne away inside every car, and the sense is that each person succumbs to a woeful and routine fate.

Watching the many Angelenos become lost and carried onward in the insular space of an automobile invokes a mournful pity in the travelers, as "elegiac traffic /ran /endlessly away" (SA 57). It is a paradox of urban existence that one might feel lonely in traffic, and Mackey here adds to the great tradition of literature about modern transit, recalling Ferlinghetti's insane, manic freeways "fifty lanes wide" in "In Goya's Greatest Scenes We Seem to See" or the dreamlike subway in Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," whose underground tracks are haunted by "apparitions of these faces in the crowd" (Ferlinghetti 9; Pound 35). Like Pound and Ferlinghetti, Mackey offers a version of hell or purgatory in the guise of urban travel and the malaise it summons: in *Splay Anthem*, the souls of Los Angeles are undone by isolation and despair, caught in an endless cycle of repetitive motion.

Mackey's negative and skeptical renderings of a dystopian Los Angeles, however, are hellish for reasons besides traffic, for Los Angeles, as the epicenter of media production, becomes a figure for the willful—and ideological—manipulation of reality. The travelers cannot find their way in Los Angeles, not merely because they are lost, but because they encounter a hallucinatory Los Angeles that is unknowable, marked as it is by simulacra whose effects render the city, as Jean Baudrillard writes, "nothing more than a network of endless, unreal circulation" (26). Initially, Mackey's travelers respond to Los Angeles genuinely as they empathize with the Angelenos, recognizing that their vantage point "was /[a] bridge over the river of /souls" (SA 57). However, the travelers' lament for the lost souls also encompasses an awareness that Los Angeles, and the larger social dystopia it is meant to represent, is built upon lies:

> it was
> a river never stepped into less
> than twice. A river of light, it
> was
> a river of lies we were told
> we were on. (SA 57)

The travelers' skepticism manifests itself in the dismayed tone with which they admit to being told lies, with the assonance between *light* and *lies* underscoring the parallel between Los Angeles and deception. Mackey also revises the Heraclitean proposition that one never steps into the same river twice: subjected to deceit, to repeated ideological programming, the Angelenos, and

the travelers themselves, must suffer stepping into the same river over and over again, experiencing an existential and political stasis—rendered figuratively by their daily commute. Los Angeles, the travelers find, is more savage than civilized: despite the river of "headlights and taillights, /flowing both ways /at once," a heart of darkness runs through the city's center (57).

Mackey does not single out Los Angeles, though, as being the only place to abound in misery and suffering. Instead, he introduces a new site, Nub, toward the end of *Splay Anthem* as a paragon of social deprivation. Both a made-up name place and human condition, Nub implies amputation and deformity as well as a land that has been cut or worn down. As Mackey explains, in a series of negative qualifications, Nub is "fraught with senses of diminishment: failed extension or falling short but not only that, the proverbial nub drawn back from overreaching . . . " (SA xv). Though Mackey admits that nub is somewhat nebulous in meaning, he does outline at least one historical and political context for the term by obliquely referencing the US presidential election in 2000 and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001:

> I don't know everything Nub is or implies or might mean (nubbed version of Numb as well as Nubia but not only that), only that it offered itself, the predicament it appeared intent on naming having to do with the dreariness of recent events as well as ontology, the imperial, flailing republic of Nub the United States has become, the shrunken place the earth has become, planet Nub. In a match that seems to have been made in hell, hijacked airliners echo and further entrench a hijacked election . . . (SA xv)

Mackey's conception of Nub is, ironically, ever expansive, generated from the nation and empire of the United States, even extending ultimately toward a planetary consciousness. Nub, indeed, broadens beyond place to name a societal affliction and condition that is not only local and specific but also abstract, global, and seemingly boundless.

The travelers arrive at Nub, finding in it a dystopian site that matches, if not surpasses, the soul-numbing sameness of Los Angeles:

> Somewhere someone
> chanted,
> Dub it
> was as much as it was Nub we were
> in, ersatz eternity looped ad infinitum,

loop
given reverb to. Echoes flew close to the
earth, bleak reconnaissance. (SA 109)

The looping freeway interchanges of Los Angeles cede to Nub's own loops: an "ersatz eternity" of artifice and a purgatory of endless repetition. The language and technology of mechanical reproduction—like the "loops" or taped sound recordings of the music industry—here convey the type of ideological programming the travelers' had witnessed in Southern California and now find in Nub. Consequently, Nub exists as a dystopia of sound, whose echoes represent a dark parody of dub music. Dub, a subgenre of reggae that features re-mixes of songs laden with echoes, heavy bass, and a DJ's "talk over," should represent the liberatory promise of artistic expression. Dick Hebdige, for instance, notes the formally innovative techniques of dub, wherein "the original tune is still recognizably there but it is broken up . . . [and] distorted with echo," and Mackey himself has discussed dub as a "musical practice that assumes a . . . non-essentialist approach . . . [which] opens up every original up to variation" (Hebdige, 83; Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement* 190). As the negating phoneme "n" implies, however, Nub constitutes the opposite of dub's openness and musical experiment. Mackey thus projects Nub to be an ideology-filled version of reality, and the travelers quickly recognize the inertia that befalls them: "Nub /was /where we were, where we'd been, /where we'd be" (105). Nub's static nature is pessimism or negativity measured in time, a dystopian space that flattens the past, present, and future into sameness and thwarts all efforts to alter it.

Nub indeed inheres negativity within itself, calling to mind a sheer nothingness—the null and void of stark social deprivation. Negation consequently becomes a defining characteristic of Nub, so much so that Mackey writes that Nub is a "chronic no" (SA 105). In his further descriptions of Nub, Mackey employs negative phrasing to reinforce the depths of nothingness that Nub evokes:

What we wanted
we couldn't have. Multiple the
names it went by, legion, wars
over
which one fit broke out, nation of
none though we were . . . Not yet
Nation of Nub that we were (SA 112)

The first negation in the passage ("What we wanted /we couldn't have") establishes the thwarted yearnings of a community, dissatisfied with the present state of affairs and desirous of something more. War is prevalent, and though Afghanistan and Iraq remain unnamed, Mackey's allusion to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the preface to *Splay Anthem* suggests that Nub could stand in for the United States at war in the Middle East and Central Asia. However, Mackey's generalized and abstract reference to war also serves to render Nub a global phenomenon. Indeed, the second negation of the passage, contending that we are a "nation of /none," implies the far-reaching effects of Nub, with the word *none* rendering the fictional space of Nub a dystopian state of nothingness that could be anywhere. The third and final negation of the passage reinforces the incomplete nature of Nub, with the travelers self-consciously acknowledging their status as a negated social body, the "Not yet /Nation of Nub."

Though the serial negations culminate in an assessment of Nub's profound deficiency, the final "not yet" of the passage simultaneously—and antiphonally—reveals Mackey's utopian impulses and his tendency to employ a series of negations to yield something positive. Mackey's phrase "not yet" once more recalls Bloch's terminology and his belief in an anticipatory consciousness that serves as the foundation for utopian thought and action. Bloch deems such anticipation to be productive of a "utopian function," which spurs on the drive for social change (143). As Bloch contends, the utopian function is:

> itself in a state of hope and of object-based premonition of the Not-Yet-Become, in the shape of a Not-Yet-Become Good. . . . [The] utopian function [is] the comprehended activity of the expectant emotion, of the hope-premonition, [and] maintains the alliance with all that is still morning-like in the world. Utopian function thus understands what is exploding, because it is this itself in a very condensed way: its Ratio is the unweakened Ratio of a militant optimism. (146)

In a comparable manner, the description of a "Not yet /Nation of Nub" offers its own address of the imminent potential of the utopian function, as Mackey's phrasing skeptically acknowledges both the state of things as they are but also forecasts what still could be. Certainly, Mackey's *Splay Anthem* often reads as anything but hopeful, yet it does reveal moments of its own "condensed," "militant" optimism: *Splay Anthem* concludes with Nub exploding, its stark reality destroyed and the hope for a better world

hesitantly introduced. Nub's more terrifying spaces, thus, will ultimately cede to multiple passages that describe possibilities of rebirth and a "morning-like" renewal for Nub's inhabitants.

To achieve such renewal, the Andoumboulou travelers first must warily examine Nub, and their skeptical assessment of the landscape subsequently prepares for the opportunity to alter Nub's conditions of deprivation. As the group takes in Nub's desolate terrain, Mackey turns to the figurative language of severed limbs and amputation to render Nub's form:

> Nub's low skyline lay to our
> left . . .
> Nub lay close to the earth . . . Nub cuts us
> off (SA 112)

In short, truncated sentences, Mackey anthropomorphizes Nub and its skyline as a reclining body. A scattering of alliterative *l*'s suggests Nub's listless and damaged state, and hanging ellipses perform their own acts of severing. The dystopian city of Nub itself resembles a body in pain, yet it will also surely inflict injury on those who inhabit it. The travelers attest that "Nub cuts us /off," and afterward lament "we were never all there. Raw knuckles /pounding the dirt bled rivers. Bloodrun /carried /us away" (112). It is this pronounced feeling of decimation—of being cut off or amputated—that initiates a shift in consciousness for the travelers and prompts their realization that they must endeavor to combat Nub's harmful effects.

The recurring images of dismemberment in *Splay Anthem* correlate to Mackey's longstanding interest in amputation and physical impairment. Mackey raises the concept of amputation—and the corresponding idea of the phantom limb—in the essay "Limbo, Dislocation, Phantom Limb," while addressing the work of the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris and his remarks on the limbo. The limbo dance, an art form whose origins Harris traces to the confined spaces of ships of the Middle Passage, is a key cultural symbol, a ritualistic reenactment of the physical punishments and adversity experienced by enslaved Africans. Mackey writes that the limbo dance, with its contorted bodily movement, inescapably carries with it associations of amputation: "the word *limb*, which the term *limbo* contains, brings in the idea of the phantom limb related to amputation, or in this context, geographical and cultural (yet another pun) dislocation" (DE 168).

However, despite the negative implications of cultural disfigurement and amputation associated with the limbo, Mackey identifies the phantom

limb as an apt metaphor for surviving trauma: the dream of a still-intact limb constitutes a compensating response to feelings of loss. The phantom limb, as Mackey argues, "is a felt recovery, a felt advance beyond severance and limitation that contends with and questions conventional reality . . . [I] t is a feeling for what is not there that reaches beyond as it calls into question what is" (DE 235). Mackey's conception of the phantom limb thus epitomizes the utopian imagination, for it is skeptical and imaginative at once, "call[ing] into question what is" and holding out the hope of something more. Nub might be a dystopian site of misery and desolation, a place and condition of deprivation, but Nub also indicates a utopian fullness that Mackey repeatedly and ardently associates with the phantom limb: "a wholeness to which [the imagined limb] can only refer, the cosmic fulfillment we at once intuit and are 'cut off' from" (DE 176).[6]

The compensatory logic of the phantom limb that Mackey espouses—an offsetting wholeness that the imagined limb provides—requires that the travelers experience not just the amputee's sense of loss but also the dream of feeling fulfillment once more. To give direct voice to the desire for fullness, Mackey shifts from the collective voice of the travelers to that of the first person. Now articulating his own experience, the lone persona takes stock of himself in the aftermath of his encounter with Nub. Though the city of Nub has cut him short, the single speaker arrives at a sense of self, damaged as it may be, that survives:

> I was at the beginning
> again,
> wanting to undo and redo what was
> done. I was only what was left . . .
> Nub was being what was left, I
> was Nub. (SA, 118)

Mackey provides a shorthand gloss in verse form on the operating schema of the phantom limb, as the speaker finds himself "wanting to undo and redo" the injuries he has sustained in the city of Nub. The speaker initially sounds a dejected note while stating that he is only what remains and proclaiming that he himself is Nub. The tone of dejection resounds more fully when the speaker subsequently claims that "Nub was being remnant, /regret" and woefully acknowledges how low he felt: "I was debris, I was what /was /left" (118).

However, Mackey's poetics of revision will not let matters lie there, for the passage ends with an antiphonal swing from embittered regret to sober reflection, if not outright and assured acceptance. Indeed, the speaker is ultimately able to locate himself with a confidence that is born from a careful consideration of his predicament: "I was only /what /was left . . . Of late looked at from another /side, /all sides . . . Out, over, either both, I /was what was left" (SA 118). In the speaker's remarks, there unexpectedly arises a tone of acceptance and certitude. It is an expression of assuredness that nears the exultant self-fulfillment of the speaker in Wallace Stevens' "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," who exclaims: "I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw /or heard or felt came not from but myself /And there I found myself more truly and more strange" (54). Mackey's speaker may not reach the surging feelings of apotheosis that the speaker of "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" does, but a heightened consciousness of self is certainly common to both. Harold Bloom describes this profound sense of self, present in the poetry of both Stevens and Walt Whitman, as one in which the persona of a Whitman or Stevens poem might "sin[g] and ch[ant] the things that are part of them, their knowledge [and] their live parts" and "what they know kee[ps] tally with the meaning of all things" (66). Such knowledge is available to the speaker of *Splay Anthem* as well. His ability to see his situation from all sides in this way performs the compensatory function of a phantom limb, though one distinctly stripped of illusion: the speaker attains a fulfillment made possible by an inner resolve and an adaptive perspective on disability.

The speaker's embrace of multiple perspectives, his willingness to understand his condition from "all sides," constitutes an entire epistemology about disability or deformity that comprehends the implications of what it means to be disabled. It is an epistemology steeped in self-reflection and a critical or skeptical assessment of the real conditions of physical impairment, trauma, or difference. Tobin Siebers has identified this epistemology as one that promotes a complex understanding of disability as it relates to the idea of embodiment:

> The value of people with disabilities to themselves does not lie in finding a way to return through medical intervention to a former physical perfection, since that perfection is a myth, nor in trying to conceal from others and themselves that they are disabled. Rather, embodiment seen complexly understands disability as an epistemology that rejects the temptation to

> value the body as anything other than what it was and that embraces what the body has become and will become relative to the demands on it, whether environmental, representational, or corporeal. (27)

To see the body as it is and for what it will become constitutes the situation that the speaker of *Splay Anthem* finds himself in when he acknowledges that he himself is Nub. Mackey endows his speaker, moreover, with a powerful skepticism, premised upon having "of late looked at [himself] from another /side, /all sides," which informs his take on reality, himself, and his condition. Embedded within Mackey's self-reflexive epistemology, as with Sieber's understanding of disability, is the imperative to understand one's body—and self—as it was constituted in the past and as it will continue to evolve into the future. For *Spay Anthem*, this means adapting to the challenges that coincide with delimiting forces of Nub.

The epiphany that the first person speaker of *Splay Anthem* experiences is not his alone but pertains to the rest of the Andoumboulou travelers as well. For this reason, Mackey returns to the collective "we," as the travelers resurrect a sense of possibility that arises from the negative depths of Nub. There are, indeed, intermittent positive signs amidst Nub's negativity, inklings that the Andoumboulou travelers could overturn Nub's debilitating effects: "Nub's inverted /run, Nub newly vented by horns /blown elsewhere" (SA 120). A breath of much-needed air could thus invert Nub, whose apocalyptic ending is seemingly announced by triumphant horns, as if by the angel Gabriel. Indeed, out of Nub's destruction comes the possibility for change: "Beginning to be the end it seemed . . . /Ending begun to be come to again. Ending /going on and on . . . " (SA 116). The rapid cycling of beginnings and endings structures another set of relations founded upon a new start: opposed to Nub's decimated, dystopian cityscape, Mackey will construct an antiphonal narrative of creation. Though the travelers are ostensibly adult men, they nevertheless inaugurate a belated creation myth of which they are the center:

> Come of late to creation's outskirts,
> rub's new muse a republic of none,
> yet-to-be band the band we were . . . (SA 120)

The Andoumboulou travelers, in their interstitial state, "yet-to-be," exemplify Bloch's notion of anticipatory utopian consciousness. Their band is at the cusp of formation, however belatedly, of a newly forming world and existence.

The Andoumboulou travelers' acknowledgment of their liminal state, their "yet-to-be" condition, prepares for recurrent images of nativity and rebirth. Nub would seemingly be inhospitable to new life, so steeped is it in destructiveness and despair. While Nub certainly suggests being cut short, Mackey interlaces Nub's negativity with words that convey a compensatory, regenerative force inherent to existence within Nub. The travelers thus realize:

> Nub no longer stood but lay and we
> lay with it, earth-sway cradling our
> backs. What the matter was rocked
> us, a way we had with dirt, awaiting
> what
> already might have been there . . . Dust . . .
> Abducted future (SA 126)

One could readily construe the predominant tone of the passage as negative: scarcity abounds, and a dust-filled and dry topography conveys a dystopian world whose possibility for the future has been severed and "[a]bucted." However, from the depths of such deprivation, Mackey invokes language associated with birth and newborns to imply that the Andoumboulou travelers could find a respite from Nub's deleterious effects in the landscape's "earth-sway cradling." The travelers remain open to seeing the potential in Nub despite its drawbacks, especially as Mackey construes "the matter [that] rocked /us" antiphonally, an ironic phrase that equivocates between a knock-out blow and the gentle swing of a cradle. To be sure, not all of Nub's negativity immediately dissipates, yet the Andoumboulou travelers, in the midst of their own creation myth, do recognize the potential for rebirth that Nub's quasi-coddling topography affords.

In accord with the motif of a creation myth, the Andoumboulou travelers begin to change their relation to Nub. The end of Nub presents hope for renewal, reversing Nub's decimating effects and indicating a path past Nub's fragmentation. *Splay Anthem*, though, does not offer up an uncomplicated vision of wholeness but instead outlines a potential means to regeneration. To revisit briefly Frost's "Directive," a regenerative return to wholeness in that poem relied upon a journey through a deserted town and its beleaguered spaces. Frost directs us in the poem past a dilapidated structure, a "house that is no more a house" and would bid us drink water to replenish ourselves, for "[our] destination and

[our] destiny's /a brook that was the water of the house" (521). Mackey, for his part, presents no magic elixir at the conclusion of *Splay Anthem* but a devastatingly dry landscape that comes after Nub, known as Dearth Lakes, or its aliases Death Lake and Dread Lake:

> Where we were rubbed
> earth in our faces, a feeling we had
> for debris. Nub, no longer standing,
> filled the air, an exact powder, fell
> as
> we ran thru it, earth-sway swaddling
> our
> feet (SA 126)

The Andmoumboulou travelers find themselves situated in an arid lakebed, with Nub destroyed, fallen under its own corruption or, worse, atomized and spread into the atmosphere, akin to the fallout from a nuclear explosion. Such a scene is surely apocalyptic, though an antiphonal reading of the end-of-the-world scenario is possible as well: Nub's end prepares for a return to wholeness, a rebirth, as the phrases "earth-sway" and "swaddle" continue the motifs of nativity and infancy in *Splay Anthem*'s final passages. With Nub now gone, the travelers might begin again, prepared to take action and build their dreams—utopian or otherwise—amidst the nothingness of the terrain.

The concluding lines of *Splay Anthem* ("we ran thru it") has the Andoumboulou travelers, either joyously or fearfully, scampering through the fallout-like debris of Nub. While the imagery resembles something from a dystopian, apocalyptic landscape, the last few pages preceding the scene of Nub's fallout at Dearth Lake expose a countervailing utopian impulse. The Andoumboulou travelers' penultimate stop on their journey is to a location that teems with utopian potential, as they find themselves at the "first unfallen church of what might've /been" (SA 122). The travelers recognize the congregation at the church to be ancestral relations who embody the spirit of redemption. Though the congregation goes unnamed, designated only as a ghostly "they," the parishioners of the "first unfallen church" could be their acknowledged kinfolk: "They were we before we were, ancestral /we /who'd never not be ill at ease" (SA 122). With the church *unfallen*, unlike so much else in Nub, the congregation embodies the imaginative, utopian drive necessary to enact social change: "They had a way of imagining, /this /they so

wished it to be" (SA 122). Though the Andoumboulou travelers may, in a wonderful double negative, "never not be ill at ease," the congregation by contrast occupies the position of hope, the dream-state that, consistent with the logic of the phantom limb, contests reality and imagines that it could be otherwise. The congregation, who have "a way of imagining" thus exemplifies the connection Mackey draws between dreaming and social change, "in which to dream is not to dream but to replace waking with realization, an ongoing process of testing and contesting reality, subjecting it to change or a demand for change" (SA xiii).

The congregation of the "first unfallen church" brings *Splay Anthem* full circle, picking up and concluding where it began. Just as the preface to *Splay Anthem* alludes to US presidential politics and the "hijacked elections" of 2000, Mackey has members of the church "talking talk of /election" (SA 123). The immediate context for *election* for the congregation from the "first unfallen church" is unmistakably a spiritual ascendance. However, it is also clear from the scene that Mackey invests the word with more than a single meaning, for he alludes to the prospect of voting, writing in subsequent lines that "the ballot-box opening grinned /and grinned again, gone we'd have been /could /we have run" (124). One could find in Mackey's use of the word "election" yet another meaning as well: the Andoumboulou travelers recognize they must choose to contest reality and *elect* to take action, having dreamed that Nub could be otherwise. Mackey implies the travelers' situation is an instinctual one of "fight or flight": they could run and be gone, or they could deliver themselves from their predicament, to continue the election metaphor, running a candidate or a political platform of their own.

While the travelers could not change the course of history and presidential politics during their fictional quest, *Splay Anthem* in its mixture of the dystopian and utopian, dreams and reality, does advocate for pragmatic political change, whether conducted through the political process or through a collective effort at the community level. Mackey endows *Splay Anthem* with the force of the imagination, whose power is to contest social reality and posit a world that has not-yet come to be. *Splay Anthem,* in this way, is a work of anticipation, a work that, in its forward-thinking endeavors, attempts to reconcile its image of the ideal with what is actual and real. It is, moreover, the commingling of the real and the imagined that comprises *Splay Anthem*'s utopian function. As Bloch stresses, utopian

thought grounds itself upon real social conditions, which serve as inspiration and guidelines for social change:

> Utopian function therefore has to prove itself through the ideal basically along the same lines as through utopias themselves: along the lines of concrete mediation with material ideal-tendency in the world . . . It has in its anticipations, if they are concrete, a correlate in the objective hope-contents of the tendency-latency; this correlate makes possible *ethical ideals as models, aesthetic ones as preappearances which point to something that is real.* (*The Principle of Hope* 173)

Bloch's overriding emphasis, here, is on aligning material and concrete social conditions with utopian ideals. For Bloch, the real is a correlative to the imagined, such that possibilities for actual social change can thus arise from intellectual and creative activity—brought forth by policy makers and by writers and artists. *Splay Anthem* itself functions, in Bloch's schema, as an exercise in ethical thought, one that skeptically scrutinizes and names a bleak contemporary reality, and also serves as a "preappearance," offering up an aesthetic model that proposes how society could be different. In its vision of finding a utopian alternative to Nub's dystopian spaces, *Splay Anthem* is a hopeful anthem for a new world, a song of coming through—and venturing beyond—social deprivation.

In chronicling the quest of the Andoumboulou travelers, *Splay Anthem* records the not-yet place of utopia. Mackey demonstrates throughout *Splay Anthem* his concern that society is not where it needs to be, though he makes this point perhaps no place more forcefully than in the book's preface when he relates an anecdote about how the Dogon people of West Africa commemorate the dead through libation rituals. The dead are said by the Dogon to be "dying of thirst," and Mackey suggests that this, too, describes our social condition (SA xiv). For the Dogon, their ancestral dead, who have "not yet" been correctly memorialized, are in a kind of purgatory, occupying a space incomplete in its lack of redemption: "These are the dead who have not yet been properly laid to rest by their surviving kin, those for whom the required rites have not yet been performed, the required altars not yet built, the attendant libations not yet poured" (SA xiv). Mackey conceives of present society in a similar vein to the Dogon dead; we have not yet achieved the place of utopia. If the dead can be redeemed through drink, Mackey posits that we might do the same. Embracing the metaphor of drinking, Mackey conceives of his own poetry—its recursive style—as

possessing ritualistic power: "Recursiveness, incantatory insistence, is liturgy and libation, repeated ritual sip, a form of sonic observance aiming to undo the obstruction it reports" (SA, xiv–xv). The back and forth, antiphonal swing of *Splay Anthem*, its vacillations between the dystopian and the utopian, its chronicle of social deprivation, and its repeated attempts to negate such misery, is Mackey's own offer to drink and be whole again, to override pessimism and undo much of what it reports.

Notes

1. The serial poem, "Mu," focuses on two lovers and their own creation myth, which is not unrelated to the motif of regeneration of the Andoumboulou travelers as the Mu lovers also represent a desire for a new beginning. That the two poetic strands of *Splay Anthem* might mirror each other is not surprising: Mackey understands one series as being the obverse of the other, so that "the two [are] now understood as two and the same . . . Each is the other, each is both" (*Splay Anthem* ix)
2. Mackey's interest in a cross-cultural poetics ensures that his conception of utopia is one that examines the challenges faced by humankind globally. The utopian designs of *Splay Anthem* in this manner prove consistent with Mackey's notion of "discrepant engagement," a comparative approach developed in his critical essays that seeks to appreciate the differences—and resonances—among multiple regional and ethnic literary traditions by "opening presumably closed orders of identity" and "worry[ing] . . . resolute boundary lines" (*Discrepant Engagement* 19–20).
3. Mackey's critique of consumerism can seem understated and obscure yet finds expression in indirect references in *Splay Anthem*, like the following: "Chuck / E. Jesus they talked about going to. That or having gone [to] . . . ," that suggests capitalism, and the corporate chains like Chuck E. Cheese's that embody it, have become a national religion (103). Note also Mackey's comment in "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol" that "a commodity-based society produces such phantom objectivity, and in so doing it obscures its roots—the relations between people" (*Discrepant Engagement* 235–6).
4. T.S. Eliot, for example, expresses the modernist appeal to the past in response to an unruly present in "Ulysses, Order, and Myth": "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him . . . It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (*Selected Prose* 177–8). David Harvey's assessment of

modernism's relation to the past is succinct, if a bit more cynical: "during the inter-war years, there was something desperate about the [modernist] search for a mythology that could somehow straighten society out in such troubled times" (*Condition of Postmodernity 34*).

5. The peril that Mackey evokes could be measured in part by the sheer number of Africans brought to Jamaica. As Sidney Mintz writes, the slave trade "was staggering . . . [with] the British colony of Jamaica . . . [importing] 662,000 slaves in 109 years" (Mintz 60).
6. In contrast to my own reading of the phantom limb as a utopian figure, Harryette Mullen reads the "recurring figure of the 'phantom limb'" in Mackey's *Bedouin Hornbook* as a "trope for the liminality of the African American, the artist and the postmodern condition itself" wherein "symbolizations of amputation/castration" form "a discourse on the innovative artist as an individual figuratively cut off from an already marginalized or mythologized collectivity" (160). Nevertheless, Mullen does argue that Mackey creates a "writer/composer" protagonist who "uses words as music to heal the phantom pain of a social body torn asunder" (159).

CHAPTER 4

Leave Us the World: Apophasis, Dissent and the Pluralist Politics of Charles Bernstein's Poetry

Abstract Charles Bernstein makes prominent use in his poetry of the strategy of apophasis—a rhetorical figure of negation wherein an individual denies saying something in the exact moment of saying it. Lagapa contends that Bernstein's denials are elaborate rhetorical gestures that not only explain his poetic methods but also initiate a debate about the purpose and politics of poetry. Such contentiousness is key to a utopian poetics. Bernstein understands the discipline of poetry as composing one large polis, in which argument is essential to poetry's vitality and a vibrant, democratic political process. Lagapa argues that a dissenting, pluralist arena constitutes what would be an ideal world for Bernstein, in which poetics and politics might be perpetually and vehemently contested for the sake of social progress.

Keywords Charles Bernstein · Utopia Negation · Apohasis pluralism · Dissent

John Smith, in *The Mysterie of Rhetorique Unveil'd*, furnishes an oft-cited definition of the rhetorical figure of apophasis, stating that it is "a kind of irony, whereby we deny that we say or doe that which we especially say or doe" (qtd. in Budick and Iser 73). Acts of ironic denial and rhetorical sleight of hand of the sort that Smith describes has long been a key

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constituent of Charles Bernstein's work. Indeed, Bernstein often uses misdirection as a means to affirm his most pressing poetic concerns, evincing a belief that "what poetry belabors is more important than what it says" (*A Poetics* 8). The process begins with Bernstein calling attention to—and belaboring—integral characteristics of his poetry by paradoxically dismissing their significance. In "The Republic of Reality," for instance, Bernstein adopts apophasis in an ironic and reflexive effort that both denies and details the effects of the poem that he is writing:

> This line is bereft
> of a subject. This line
> has no reference apart
> from its context in
> this line. This line
> is only about itself.
> This line has no meaning:
> its words are imaginary, its
> sounds inaudible. (*My Way*, 315)[1]

With each negative iteration, the poem's ironies augment exponentially: Bernstein's denials of subject, context, sound, and meaning all belie the fact that the lines actually refer to these very things. Indeed, the poem self-consciously addresses as its subject the particular means by which poems make meaning and also explores how linguistic categories of context and reference operate within poetic works. The lines here, furthermore, mock the notion that a poem could be so self-contained; steeped in the necessarily social and political medium of language, the poem's truculent disavowal of any relation to the external world reveals itself to be an absurd and impossible claim.

Drawn from principles of rhetoric and debate, Bernstein's apophatic speech is, at base, argumentative. The denials not only are at odds with themselves, expressing one thing and meaning another, but they also quarrel with the prevailing conventions of poetry—an approach consistent with the subversive poetics of the Language poets. As George Hartley has argued, Bernstein and his fellow Language poets reject "the dominant model for poetic production today—the so-called voice poem . . . in which the poet (a self-present subject) transmits a particular message ('experience,' 'emotion') to a reader (another self-present subject) through a language which is neutral, transparent, 'natural'" (xii). The lines from "The Republic

of Reality" bear such a stance out; when Bernstein writes ironically that "This line /is only about itself. /This line has no meaning: /its words are imaginary," he argues against language conceived as a transparent means of expression and also reproaches the insular nature of the conventional voice poem.

The repeated use of a deictic—a word that points to, or designates, its context—furthers the effects of irony in "The Republic of Reality." While a deictic like the pronoun "this" should ground and localize meaning, the lines in fact refer to and gesture at something beyond the poem itself. "The Republic of Reality," with its ironic appeal to clarity, is an acerbic reference to misguided campaigns aimed at broadening the appeal of poetry to a wider audience by simplifying it. Bernstein has long been an outspoken critic of such efforts, voicing his dissent from programs like National Poetry Month for "promoting poetry as if it were 'easy listening,'" an approach which "just reinforces the idea that poetry is culturally irrelevant and has done a disservice not only to poetry deemed too controversial or difficult but also to the poetry it puts forward [as easy and accessible]" (*Attack* 28). These strategies of promoting of "accessibility" in poetry are, Bernstein argues, "based on the condescending notion that readers are intellectually challenged, and mustn't be presented with anything but Safe Poetry" (*Attack* 28).

Bernstein also addresses those who would consider Language poetry to be too laden with critical theory and thus rendered overly abstruse. "The Republic of Reality" is presumably aimed therefore at someone like poet Mark Levine, who has castigated Language poets for their embrace of poststructuralist linguistic theory: "In the case of Language poetry, [saying the right thing] has involved the adoption of not only the conceptual terms, but more paradoxically, the thematics, of theory, and the re-packaging of theory in forms that look like poems—at which point they are ready to be received, with stunningly un-critical welcome, by academic critics" (77). In yet another irony, the stripped-down, simple, and frank speech of "The Republic of Reality" seems intentionally antithetical to so-called jargon of critical theory, yet the poem's address of language and its workings—its savvy, self-conscious discussion of the semiological functions of meaning—nevertheless suggests its affinity with structuralist and poststructuralist theory. Even in the absence of explicit references poststructuralist ideas, "The Republic of Reality" still manages to point to the presence of critical theory and its importance to the poem's meaning.

The propensity for adopting apophasis—Bernstein's tendency to deny the very matter about which he speaks as he is speaking—arises from a broadly ironic mode and negative, dissenting stance. Bernstein frequently adopts irony, and apophasis in particular, as a means to dissent from, and undermine, conventional poetic practices and to mount, against his detractors, a rhetorically elaborate defense of his poetry. Such a tactic is consistent with Linda Hutcheon's description of irony as "an effective strategy of oppositionality," displaying an "ability to contest dominant habits of mind and expression" (30; 52). Bernstein thus employs irony to counteract the norms of what he calls "official verse culture," that is, a literary establishment composed of MFA programs, poetry journals, and large publishing houses who prize, in place of formal or rhetorical complexity, an aesthetics of "common voice, clarity, sincerity, /[and] directness" (*A Poetics* 46). Contrarian and oppositional, irony is a literary device that is instrumental to Bernstein's ability to argue with, and dissent from, the political and aesthetic quietist beliefs of his day. As Bernstein sees it, such is the goal of "difficult," experimental poetry: "[i]ts complexity and ad*vers*ity to conformity puts such a poetic practice well outside the stadium of dominant culture. It is this refusal of efficacy, call it a refusal of submission, that marks its political character" (*My Way* 4).

The many ironic reversals and contradictions inherent to Bernstein's use of apophasis prove integral to the politics, utopian implications, and the dissenting force of Bernstein's poetry. As Bernstein uses irony, apophasis, and negative assertions, he not only seeks to unsettle and oppose dominant literary and social thought but also to introduce with his poetry an alternative poetics and politics into the public sphere. Toward this end, each negative, apophatic, or ironic utterance in Bernstein's poetry represents a reversal in logic, one meant to counteract rigid and uniform literary and political beliefs. While opposition and dissent readily find expression in the content and subject matter of Bernstein's poems, the logic of reversal is also explicitly a matter of his poetic form. In the essay "Semblance" from *Content's Dream*, Bernstein likens the formal features of his poetry to a Möbius strip, explaining that his compositional strategy of rapid shifts in speech and discursive turns are intentionally disruptive:

> My interest [is] in not conceptualizing the field of the poem as a unitary plane . . . Rather than having a single form or shape or idea of the work pop out as you read, the structure itself is pulled into a moebius-like

> twisting momentum. In this process, the language takes on a centrifugal force that seems to trip it out of the poem, turn it out from itself… (*Content's Dream* 38)

The abrupt turns of Bernstein's technique can result in a poem that can be a challenge to follow, especially as "the gaps and jumps compose a space of shifting parameters, [and] types and styles of discourse [are] constantly crisscrossing" (*Content's Dream* 38). As opposed to the uniformity of the voice poem, Bernstein seeks to establish multi-voiced, discursively rich poetry that refuses to exist on "unitary plane."

The "moebius-like" twists and multiple discursive planes in Bernstein's poems, though, yield something more than just an abstruse verbal puzzle; they reveal a utopian impulse to bring about new forms of thinking and to facilitate alternate ways of understanding poetry and —by extension—society. Bernstein's experiments with form and poetic speech—including his ironic reversals and rhetorical turns—also ultimately indicate his adherence to a pluralist politics, whose utopian aim to ameliorate society unexpectedly depends *not* upon consensus but dissension and disagreement among ideological positions. With every abrupt, rapid discursive and argumentative turn in his poems, Bernstein simulates a political arena composed of multiple perspectives, each of which is engaged in a dynamic act of debate; it is with the invocation of a plurality of political perspectives in his poetry that Bernstein intends to keep the possibility of dissent continuously active and renewed and thereby promote a society continuously changing and improving through the vitality of debate.

Bernstein has previously articulated his interest in a pluralist, contentious society with a concept that he calls the "polis." The polis, as Bernstein articulates it, is the public sphere that poetry enacts; poetry should create, in the exchange between writers and readers on the printed page or in the communal space of a poetry reading, a sense of a shared community. Bernstein's image of the polis is, moreover, fundamentally a utopian one: he conceives of poetry as a social act that reinforces civic principles and enables communities to cohere. However, the vitality of this social collective, composed of multiple, conflicting perspectives and voices, necessarily depends upon disagreement and dissent:

> poetry explores crucial questions about the core values that constitute a polis; it allows for reformulations of the basic issues of political policy and

> the means we use to represent them. It may even mock what men, and women, hold most dear, so that in our laughter we may come to terms with what we cling to.
>
> Poetry thickens discussion, refuses reductive formulations. (*My Way* 240)

Though poetry driven by mocking, dissenting humor may appear divisive, Bernstein nevertheless understands poetry to be a means for reinforcing a collective social experience: "poetry engages *public* language at its roots, in that it tests the limits of conventionality while forging alternate conventions.... [T]he contained scale of such poetic engagements allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the formation of public space: of polis" (*A Poetics* 219). The utopian potential of poetry, as Bernstein sees it, derives from the ability of a poetic work to dissent from static, received ideas about social reality and to contribute new ways of thinking through possibilities for social change. In this way, poetry might "construct a new polis in the site of the old: no longer postponed, [but] *enacted*. Then poetry's pealing would be a toll from that 'other' world calling for its truth to be established in *this* one" (*Content's Dream* 379).

Bernstein's proposal for a discordant, dissent-filled poetics displays a surprising correspondence to the philosophy of William James, finding in particular a close corollary in James' notion of the pluriverse. In "A Pluralistic Universe," James develops the idea of the pluriverse or multiverse in stark contrast to a singular, unified concept of the universe. James argues that a pluralistic view far better appreciates the complexity and multiform nature of reality than does an absolutist position, which holds to a single explanation of the universe: "No matter what the content of the universe may be, if you only allow that it is *many* everywhere and always ... so far from defeating its rationality ... you leave it in possession of the maximum amount of rationality practically attainable by our minds" (319). The chief virtue of pluralism for James is its capacity to appreciate complexity and difference—multiformity in place of uniformity—in its understanding of reality: "pluralism lets things really exist in the each-form or distributively" (324). James consequently advises that philosophy ought to foster an environment composed of a multiplicity of perspectives and ruled by an imperative "not to lock out any interest forever. No matter what doors it closes, it must leave other doors open for the interests which it neglects" (32).

When applied to politics, Jamesian pluralism offers a promising worldview for civic progress, for it recognizes that there exists a multitude of constituencies, perspectives and ideological positions for social amelioration. The

pluralist believes that a collective of multiple political positions can generate ideas beneficial to society, particularly if new thought—dissenting and discordant in nature—disrupts staid social conventions. As Kennan Ferguson has argued, the political implications of Jamesian pluralism lead to a model of society that promotes a multiplicity of perspectives and encourages productive levels of disagreement:

> Rather than establishing general agreement, politics would become a seedbed of dissension. Political actors would see themselves as creating concepts, motivations and new sensibilities. These should emerge both in concert with and in opposition to the multiple points of agreement and disagreement already extant in political and social culture. (91)

The ultimate aim of a Jamesian political pluralism is a vibrant political sphere that subverts the homogenizing effects of consensus and the tendency of society to neutralize difference in favor of uniformity: "Politics, in a prescriptively pluralistic sense, should be about opening contested spaces rather than closing them off: noting the locations of exclusion, encouraging disavowal and dissent, and subverting consensus" (Ferguson 91).

One of the means through which Bernstein encourages dissent and challenges prevailing thought is through irony. The apophatic tendencies in Bernstein's work, his simultaneous acts of denial and affirmation, make use of irony and contradiction to promote a scene of conflicted or divided speech within his poems. Bernstein speaks, for example, on the subject of split, or multi-voiced, utterances in his poem "The Lives of the Toll Takers," advocating for the use irony and humor to formulate a negative, dissenting critique, while leaving room to advance an alternate view:

> To refuse
> the
> affirmation
> of
> (a)
> straight-forward
> statement . . .
> is
> not
> to
> be
> so

bent-over
with
irony
as
to
be
unable
to
assert
anything (*Dark City* 13)

Written in disjunctive, fragmentary lines, "The Lives of the Toll Takers" proclaims the virtues of an ironic, dissenting poetry that offers a jocose political critique yet still manages to avow its principles. Bernstein thus makes an appeal for both the merits and limits of irony; he endorses an oppositional stance (a rejection of "affirmation") yet understands that an aimless use of irony is merely fatuous. Bernstein's deployment in the passage of negation and negative phrasing, along with the formal spacing of the page, is, moreover, strategic and purposeful. The syntax is somewhat trying to read, with its multiple negative constructions ("to refuse /the affirmation," "not /to /be /so /bent-over" and "unable /to /assert /anything") proving to be extremely, even confusingly, convoluted, yet the line breaks, haphazard spacing and negative syntax all work precisely toward the point that Bernstein is trying to make: the reader must work through the negative phrasing in order to discern an ethical imperative of affirming one's politics and promoting a form of utopian social change through acts of dissent.

One could argue that the very difficulty in following the logic of the line of thought in "The Lives of the Toll Takers"—embedded as it is in multiple turns and negations—itself functions as a small model for a utopian politics: the patience and attention necessary to read the lines are akin (on a small scale) to the hard work of putting utopian ideals in practice and the challenge of rethinking social positions that have been so long set in place. Bernstein's difficult syntax and convoluted, Möbius-like spacing function, then, as a minute, utopian exercise in thinking differently about the world and its prospects for change. As David Harvey writes, "Postulating such alternatives [in utopian models] allows us to conduct a 'thought experiment' in which we imagine how it is to be (and think) in a different situation. It says that by changing our situatedness (materially and mentally) we can change our vision of the world. But it also tells us how hard the practical work will be to get from where we are to some other

situation like that" (*Spaces of Hope* 238). Bernstein seems similarly mindful of the productive role that poetry can play in utopian thinking, especially as he remains astutely aware of the necessity of practical political action: "Every poem is a model of some other world, a practice of some other reality: but it always leads back to this one" (*A Poetics* 17).

Bernstein's pronounced appeal for irony in "Lives of the Toll Takers" suggests that the device is an integral characteristic of his work. However, while evidence of irony seems everywhere present in Bernstein's writing, it should be noted that Bernstein has previously balked at descriptions of his poetry as ironic. Bernstein's comments that dismiss, even deny, the idea that irony is at work in his poems, though, actually reveal and elucidate how irony is relevant to his poetry and also important to his poetics of dissent and negation. In Bernstein's several statements about irony, he mostly objects to irony that proceeds from a binary opposition and is too rigid in its construction. As Bernstein attests, "[m]y problem with irony is that it is a set-up in which the 'real' meaning is the opposite of the surface meaning. X equals not X" (*Content's Dream* 461–2).

In place of such a limited notion of irony, Bernstein would propose a model that is more fluid or is plural in its construction:

> What I want is humor that opens out into a multivolitional field destabilizing to any fixed meaning that can be assigned and that persists out of context. Octavio Paz has used the term "meta-irony": "an irony that destroys its negation and, hence, returns in the affirmative." But I wouldn't want to stop at that flip back to the affirmative but to go beyond yes and no. Humor as destabilizing not only the negation to mean affirmation but the affirmation also—the idea of a perpetual motion machine that never stops pinging and ponging off the walls, ceilings floors. (*Content's Dream* 462)

As a special kind of humor, Bernstein would thus seem to embrace irony, if irony entails the proliferation and not a reduction of meaning. In this regard, Bernstein concurs with Linda Hutcheon, who urges "that we stop thinking of irony only in binary *either/or* terms of the substitution of an 'ironic' for a 'literal' (and opposite) meaning, and see what would happen if we found a new way of talking about ironic meaning as, instead, relational, inclusive and differential . . . [involving] an oscillating yet simultaneous perception of plural and different meanings" (66).

Bernstein's apophatic utterances evince the type of dissent and verbal complexity he demands of ironic speech, particularly as the denials in his poems tend to promote his poetic stance despite disparaging remarks to

the contrary. The epigraph of the poem "Dark City," for instance, provides a discrete, compact example of apophasis. The epigraph is a quotation of Lizabeth Scott's sardonic quip to Charlton Heston from the movie *Dark City*: "we're a great pair—I've got no voice and you've got no ear" (*Dark City* 139). The appropriated line, in its new context at the start of a poem, reads as a reflexive commentary about speech in poetic works. The flat denial of "voice," if ascribed to Bernstein and applied to his poetics, can be read on one level as a dissenting, ironic, and acerbic declaration of his antipathy for the conventions of poetic voice within "official verse culture." The claim of having no voice, though, can also be interpreted as an instance of apophasis, an ironic act of denial that obliquely yet importantly points to Bernstein's use of an array of voices in "Dark City." Bernstein's denial in the epigraph, instead of simply repudiating the matter of voice, calls special attention to the number and range of speaking subjects in "Dark City" and the complexity of speech and the plurality of voice and discourse as it arises in the poem.

Poetic "voice," indeed, does prove to be a crucial matter for Bernstein's poetry, yet it enters into "Dark City," and other of his poems, in an unconventional, multifaceted way. Tenney Nathanson has described Bernstein's technique of using a multiplicity of voices as a modified version of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, resulting in a "refraction of collaged discourse" (303). As Bernstein himself explains, there is a premise of inclusion at play in his work: "What interests me is a poetry and a poetics that do not edit out so much as edit in: that include multiple conflicting perspectives and types of languages and styles in the same poetic work" (*A Poetics* 2). Bernstein's marked denial of voice in the epigraph of "Dark City" can thus be construed as a distinct avowal of his poetic principles—that is, a reimagining of voice independent of the conventional poetic speaker and an adherence to a poetics composed of a plurality of voices. As Bernstein advises, "it's possible to have the resonant presence of language [in a poem] without hypostasizing a single speaker as the source of the language . . . [Poetry need not be a mere] transcript of the voice, but [can] acknowledge [instead] its own materiality and acoustic density . . . " (*My Way* 28).

If the comment about having "no ear" in the "Dark City" also refers to Bernstein, it too is an apophatic statement. The self-deprecating remark in particular discounts Bernstein's ability to arrange words or combine discourses with precision or with a musical sensibility. However, this confession of being tone deaf rings particularly false for Bernstein. Hank Lazer notes that Bernstein "has established a well-developed ear for a peculiar

dissonance in word-sounds, a kind of deliberately clotted, awkward, technical language that has its own percussive music" (41). Linda Reinfeld likewise observes that Bernstein pays careful, discerning attention to the sounds words make: "for Bernstein, all poetry hinges on sound: sound matters, anchors meaning" (76). The denials of voice and ear from the epigraph to "Dark City" direct the reader to take these poetic principles especially into account when reading the poem. The negation inherent to the ironic denials operates not as a refutation of voice and sound but as an affirmation of their importance to Bernstein's poetics.

Subsequent to the epigraph of "Dark City," Bernstein speaks obliquely in the poem to the complexities of voice and subjectivity in his work: "the heart sinks daily in /slump of sampled parts, and *I feel like* carelessness, disowning what's /acquired" (*Dark City* 139). These lines attest to Bernstein's pluralistic poetic approach: a typical Bernstein poem might make use of "sampled parts" of quotations, clichés, and proverbs (either related verbatim or revised). The lines also make explicit a desire to jettison conventional expressions of subjectivity and poetic voice, rejecting a confessional stance ("*I feel like*") as a careless indulgence. For the rest of "Dark City," Bernstein layers his own statements with those of others, as a multiplicity of other voices ends up sporadically populating the text, everything from manic advertisements ("HELLO AGAIN THIS IS JACK BENNY FOR /JELLO PUDDING AND PIE FILLING") to a crime novel ("Mildred paced around the museum /for another few hours before she spotted /him, but it was much to crowded to /finish the job right there") to an absurdist variation on Archibald Macleish's "Ars Poetica" ("A poem should not mean but impale /not be but bemoan") (*Dark City* 140–41). For "Dark City," the result of so many collective voices is a textured, cacophonous text, composed of ever-shifting planes of context, speaking subjects and perspective, all of which were initiated by the apophatic denials and negations in the poem's epigraph.

Irony and apophasis feature in other Bernstein's poems as well, fitting a consistent pattern in which Bernstein illustrates major poetic principles through rhetorical acts of negation. For instance, "A Poem is Not a Weapon" is a conceptual work that playfully assails the act of censorship and dissents from the apolitical strivings of many mainstream poems. The poem as a whole is consistent with what Marjorie Perloff has described as a conceptual "turn in Bernstein's work from the non-semantic experiments of 1980s and '90s to a more intertextual, formally aware . . . *literary* lyric" (*Unoriginal Genius* 86). Perloff's analysis of Bernstein's newfound

conceptual emphasis astutely focuses on the libretto for the opera *Shadowtime* and primarily analyzes its use of "appropriation, constraint and concretis[m]" (86). However, it is Sol LeWitt's seminal essay "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" that seems especially pertinent to the conceptual design and irony of a work like "A Poem is Not a Weapon." Lewitt writes: "In conceptual art the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand . . . The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (12). In several of Bernstein's conceptual poems, there is an ironic, self-conscious and playful idea that governs and drives the work. Being highly reflexive, these poems revolve around a central conceptual design but also extend beyond it. As Lewitt says, in "Sentences on Conceptual Art," the conceptual work of art often involves a concept and a process of execution: "[t]he concept and idea are different. The former implies a general direction while the latter is the component. Ideas implement the concept" (106).

"A Poem is Not a Weapon" proceeds as many other poems might, with a dedication and a title serving to introduce and frame its content. What immediately follows the poem's title and dedication, though, is substantially less conventional and certain, for Bernstein next ironically addresses the subjects of censorship and institutional authority with a playful gesture of omission:

> A Poem Is Not a Weapon
> For/After Tom Raworth
> [THIS POEM REMOVED FOR INSPECTION AND VERIFICATION.]
> (*Girly Man* 164)

The implication of the poem, if it is taken at face value, is that its content is absent, its lines "removed" and censored by an authoritarian entity. What should make for an all-too-serious, sobering subject matter in "A Poem is Not a Weapon," however, gets turned around, displaced by the ironic and self-referential conceit of the poem. "A Poem is Not a Weapon" manages to satirize the authoritarian, institutional impulse to censor through a *simulated* act of censorship. Bernstein, furthermore, enacts a type of political dialogue or debate within the "lines" of "A Poem is Not a Weapon," between a censorious authority and the contrarian voice in the title. Bernstein thus manages to reverse a dystopian scenario and the dire prospect of censorship, converting it instead into a utopian impulse,

one of dissent and resistance, as the multi-voiced poem stands, ultimately, as a jocose refutation of control.

Rhetorical negation and apophasis, furthermore, play an integral part in how "A Poem is Not a Weapon" achieves its ironic effects of reversal. A direct, immediate meaning to be derived by the title is that a poem is *not* a harmful object; composed of mere words, so the logic goes, a poem cannot rise to the level of a weapon and ought not to be categorized as one. Through an apophatic denial, however, Bernstein implies the opposite: that poetry nevertheless *can* be a political weapon, whose dangerous qualities could initiate the impulse to censor. The act of denial within the title thus obliquely points to the powerful political implications of poetry, even if the act of censorship, in the case of the poem, is merely a simulated and ironic one.

The "missing" content or body of the poem coheres with principles of apophasis as well. Thomas Gibbons in his account of apophasis quotes Cicero to illustrate that the act of omission is fundamental to apophasis: "Omission, says [Cicero], is when we say we pass over, or do not know, or will not mention, that which we declare with the utmost force" (157). By implying that the text of "A Poem is Not a Weapon" is absent, Bernstein adheres to the negative properties of apophasis and declares—with "utmost force"—that there can be a viable politics to poetry and its aesthetic form. That the text of "A Poem is Not a Weapon" was "REMOVED" and scrutinized for "VERIFICATION," thus adds final levels of irony. If verification entails determining that something is true or valid, Bernstein's poem ironically depends upon an untruth: the simulated censorship is fake, yet the poem nevertheless makes a genuine appeal for the freedom of expression and the power of speech.

Ironic denials and apophasis form the basis of another of Bernstein's conceptual works, "Recantorium (A Bachelor Machine, After Duchamp After Kafka)," a prose poem that sustains a long, practiced reversal or inversion of logic in which Bernstein defends his poetry by pretending to disavow it. The conceit of "Recantorium" is not, as in "A Poem is Not a Weapon," one of censorship per se but of institutional reprimand and condemnation, for Bernstein pretends in the poem to be summoned to an inquisition or court testimony in order to confess and attest to his heretical "crimes" against Official Verse Culture. First performed at the "Conceptual Poetry & Its Others" conference at the Poetry Center of the University of Arizona on May 29, 2008, "Recantorium" begins with Bernstein offering his testimony and affirming who he is:

> I, Charles, son of the late Joseph Herman, later known as Herman Joseph, and Shirley K., later known as Sherry, New Yorker, aged fifty-eight years, arraigned personally before this Esteemed Body,... kn[eel] before you, Most Eminent and Reverend Readers, Inquisitors-General against heretical depravity throughout the entire Poetry Commonwealth ... (*Attack* 271)

What follows, and continues for several pages, is an ironic admission of guilt and a spurious apology for the wrongs he has committed in the name of experimental and politically engaged poetry. Bernstein avows, with tongue-in-cheek and hand on "the Books of Accessible Poets," that he has "always believed, do believe, and by your help will in the future believe, all that is held, preached, taught and expressed by the Books of Accessible Poets" (*Attack* 271). The swearing of an oath here serves Bernstein's conceit of being put on a trial but also cunningly assails the notion of a poetic self recurrently promulgated by the standard MFA program "voice" poem. The rhetorical strategy of "Recantorium" is one of acute reversal: Bernstein's "self," steeped in irony, reveals itself to be falsified, a calculated image of overwrought sincerity.

Caroline Bergvall, commenting on Bernstein's "Recantorium," notes that the act of recanting within religious traditions has historically entailed a ritualistic, humiliating function not only to compel an individual to renounce heresies but also to reinforce the uniformity of collective belief: "Such acts of recantation, frequent in the early Catholic church, notably to contain intellectual dissent, were written mainly to be spoken. This was part of the act in its humiliation.... There is coercion and the disciplining of belief in such an act, whose function it is to force the individual to renege on their convictions prior to allowing them re-entry into the collective group" (sic, Bergvall 9). The effect of such coerced recanting, as Bergvall points out, is one of homogenization: "Bernstein uses the heretical analogy here to declare his new found allegiance to the rule of the one poetic aesthetic, mainstream culture" (Bergvall 9). Though an enforced compliance with institutional orthodoxy is the primary focus of "Recantorium," casting "official verse culture" as a dominant and monolithic literary body, Bernstein's act of recantation is thoroughly duplicitous, whose every utterance turns upon one irony after another.

In searching for a rhetorical model of ironic opposition for "Recantorium," Bernstein, might have found inspiration in the work of Claude McKay. An immigrant to the United States from Jamaica, McKay

wrote poems that frequently combined mock deference with a caustic social critique as a way to protest the unequal relations of power in his homeland under British colonial rule. In an essay entitled "Poetics of the Americas," written several years prior to "Recantorium," Bernstein praised McKay's equivocal poems, at once defiant and acquiescent, that dramatized the tense dynamics that existed between the "hegemonic and the subaltern" (*My Way* 126). McKay's poetry, Bernstein contends, displays a savvy ability to argue with and resist imperial power—and to foreground ideological differences—through a complex and ironic "poetics of compromise and dependency—of hybridization and contradiction and multivocality" (*My Way* 126). Such a deft use of irony on McKay's part leads to a stealthy deriding of the colonial powers that subordinate him. With "breathtaking duplicity and paradox," McKay's poems, Bernstein asserts, "corrode the very authoritativeness to which they appear to be kowtowing, accumulating a counter-hegemonic force that mocks every surface pretense of accommodation" (*My Way* 127; 128).

McKay's poetics seemingly have bearing on how Bernstein will articulate his opposition to "official verse culture," insofar as it is hegemonic and experimental poetries occupy a subordinate or marginal position.[2] Bernstein has made a case for the hegemony of poetic institutions before, arguing that large-scale publishers and national poetry organizations function in an all-powerful role and actively consolidate their authority: "What makes official verse culture official is that it denies the ideological nature of its practice while maintaining hegemony in terms of major media exposure and academic legitimation and funding" (*Content's Dream* 249). In "Recantorium," Bernstein will counter the hegemony of poetic institutions by adopting, like McKay, a stance of humility that is, nevertheless, equivocal and subversive. Toward such an end, Bernstein recurrently utters false admissions of error and confesses in hyperbolically pitiful tones to feelings of depravity and error: "I am wrong, I have strayed from the path of decency, restraint and honor" (*Attack* 281). In the final pages of "Recantorium," moreover, Bernstein will sound beaten and conquered as he defers to the judgment of the standard bearers of poetic convention: "I submit myself to all the pains and penalties imposed and promulgated in the canons and other constitutions, general and particular, against such delinquents as myself" (*Attack* 282).

Bernstein's persistent irony, however, suggests that these words of resignation and submission ought to be heard otherwise, constituting a compelling act of dissent voiced in the negative. The true gist of

"Recantorium" depends on discerning a note of defiance in his expression of defeat, despite what the words literally purport to mean: "And I say and declare, vow and proclaim, to all assembled here or who may read this document, in printed or digital form, or who may hear it through audio recordings: I must not hold, defend, or teach in any way whatsoever . . . the said false doctrine" (*Attack* 279). Properly recognized as apophatic, Berntein's rhetoric turns from the negative to the positive, from explicit denial to implied affirmation, resulting in a clear imperative going forward that Bernstein must, in fact, "hold, defend, [and] teach" his poetics. Apophasis is thus key to Bernstein's acts of rebellion; his oblique denials ultimately testify to his willingness to dissent from orthodoxy.

The conspicuously artificial self that Bernstein conjures in "Recantorium" also prepares for an equally fraudulent capitulation that forms one of the poem's major thrusts: the purpose of poetry and its accessibility. As part of his recantation, Bernstein reverses and renounces a previous position he claims to have held: "I altogether abandon the false opinion that only elitist and obscure poetry should be praised" (*Attack* 272). The irony and peculiarity of the renunciation comes from the fact that Bernstein never maintained such a belief. A logical conclusion to draw is that obscurity and elitism are actually charges that have routinely been leveled against Bernstein. As an advocate for complex, difficult poetry, Bernstein adheres to a belief that poetry is best when it challenges a reader, yet he balks at labeling experimental poetry as elitist: "We must resist the idea that difficult art is elitist, any more than that science is elitist or that learning is elitist. . . . By denying the value of the labor necessary to become linguistically or culturally informed, we encourage the maintenance of an uninformed, indeed ignorant, citizenry" (*My Way* 311). For Bernstein, poetry that avoids complexity—that focuses on ease of reception—patronizes its audience by not respecting the audience's ability to think rigorously. Poets, instead, "have a commitment to make their work . . . not in the watered down forms that only capitulate to the mediocracy, but in forms that challenge, confront, exhilarate, provoke disturb, question, flail, and even fail" (*My Way* 15–16). Bernstein's ironic rejection of elitism and obscurity thus reveals his agenda in writing "Recantorium": he seeks to enter into a debate over the importance of writing challenging, even "difficult" poetry.

"Recantorium" enacts this debate by incorporating into the poem the voices and perspectives of others with whom he wants to argue. However, the logic and aesthetic dynamics of reversals maintain: Bernstein expresses

viewpoints that belong to others as if they were his own. Echoing the opinion of someone who advocates for accessible poetry, Bernstein ironically claims as part of his recantation: "the best way to get general readers to start to read poetry is to present them with broadly appealing work, with strong emotional content and a clear narrative line" (*Attack* 272). The position that Bernstein here satirizes is similar to one that Dana Gioia has advanced in the essay "Can Poetry Matter?," in which Gioia outlines a few proposals to improve poetry's standing as a public art form. Gioia argues that poetry ought, above all, to be entertaining, with poetry anthologies, for instance, compiled so as "to move, delight, and instruct readers" (20). Gioia's other remarks in the essay endorse an ease of accessibility, particularly as his plan invokes the tastes of children as a criterion for enhancing poetry's appeal: "Poems should be memorized, recited, and performed. The sheer joy of the art must be emphasized. The pleasure of performance is what first attracts children to poetry, the sensual excitement of speaking and hearing the words of the poem" (20). Bernstein's own comment in "Recantorium," that poets could find a wider audience by writing "broadly appealing work," is thus both an ironic parody of the ideas espoused by Gioia *and* at the same time itself a demonstration of the value of "difficult" poetry: Bernstein challenges his reader to recognize his promotion of likable poetry as an ironic contestation of—and dissent from—straightforward, easily accessible poetic speech.

Making "Recantorium" itself into a contentious polis or site of discord, Bernstein continues to do battle with his critics in other sections of the poem, and, in spite of Bernstein's conciliatory tone, the discord and contentiousness of the poem are clearly observable. Bernstein's next adversary is D.W. Fenza, the Executive Director of the Association of Writing Programs, and the debate revolves around the poetics of the Language poets, the use of theory in poetry, and the obligation of social or political critique in poetry. The source of the dispute is a graduation speech delivered by Fenza, entitled "Advice for Graduating MFA Students in Writing: The Words and the Bees." Fenza's speech takes Bernstein, as a representative of Language poetry, to task for creating a hostile environment in which writers, who do not "talk [the Language poets'] kind of theory-infused talk" are made to feel "incapable of a humane thought – incapable of writing a single fresh or timely word – unless you subscribe to their current methodology or theory" (Fenza 4). In a droll imitation of the theoretically informed speech of Language poets, Fenza claims that poets "must interrogate the whole notion of *talk* and problematicize the materiality of the text, as our *lingua franca* has been tainted by the

commodifcations of consumerism-francs, marks, yen, and dollars-devalued by capitalism," (Fenza 4). Fenza also repudiates the critique of the uniformity that Bernstein designates with the term, "Official Verse Culture," arguing that the contention is, as a generalization, "rather extreme; it's the demagoguery of a tone-deaf poetics; and, I feel, it's morally repugnant" (5).

Though there are various claims in Fenza's piece that could be taken up for debate, it is the comment about being "morally repugnant" that Bernstein specifically cites and to which he responds in "Recantorium." Bernstein addresses Fenza's castigation of Language poets with an ironic remark that both repudiates Fenza's opinion and underscores the high office that Fenza holds: "I was wrong, I apologize, I recant. I altogether abandon the false opinion that the head of a major writing organization was out of line when he called me 'morally repugnant' for not sharing his views of poetry" (*Attack* 272–3). Fenza's position as the Executive Director of the Association of Writing Programs allows Bernstein to frame the dispute as one involving institutional power, and Fenza's casting of Bernstein's views as "morally repugnant" additionally steers the debate into questions of individual character, rectitude and official reprimand. The issue of "not sharing" the same views about the purpose of poetry becomes, then, a matter of personal attack and moral condemnation, one that Bernstein likens to a surreal scenario from a Kafka novel and leads to his false "confessions" of guilt in "Recantorium." Bernstein will also note the absurdity of unequal expectations of decorum in his exchange with Fenza. Whereas Fenza is lauded for his opinions, Bernstein maintains that he alone has been characterized as uncivil and pugnacious: "he [Fenza] is entitled to his views, and my criticism of him was divisive and partisan" (*Attack* 273).[3]

Bernstein's row with Fenza and others upholding the "Blessed . . . doctrine of Authentic Poetry," however, is not one sided. Befitting his ideal polis its the principle of civic debate, Bernstein will defend himself and his poetics with ironic acts of testimony and a series of apophatic denials that outline his poetic ideals in reverse. In these instances, the negative rhetoric of "Recantorium" reaches its apogee, revealing obliquely that for which Bernstein truly stands:

> I altogether abandon the false opinion that Official Verse Culture, through prestigious prizes awarded for merit and reviews in nationally circulated publications selected for major importance, and including appointments of the poet laureate, does not represent the best and the finest, the most profound and significant, the richest and most rewarding, poetry of our nation. (*Attack* 273)

True to the logic of apophasis, Bernstein denies his belief that major awards, national publications and title of US poet laureate, *do not*, in fact, amount to the best written work in literature, particularly if experimental poetic techniques and politically inflected poetics—of the kind that Bernstein endorses—are precluded from consideration for such honors. Bernstein further adds to his apophatic remarks by speciously dismissing beliefs he actually holds. He claims, for instance, to abandon "the false opinion that beauty can be found in the tattered, torn, ripped, battered, crippled, crumpled, odd, discounted, inconsequential, or the asymmetric" (*Attack* 279). Bernstein will also repudiate "the use of found or appropriated texts in poems, whether attributed or unattributed, or the use of any external constraints, operations, [or] procedures" (*Attack* 278). These claims and others are, of course, patently false yet coyly reveal the effects that "Recantorium" sets out to achieve: a defense of experimental poetics.

Consequently, "Recantorium" ought clearly to be understood less as an act of recantation and more as a manifesto proclaiming a belief in formally innovative techniques and the use of satire, parody, and ironic conceptual frameworks within poems. Apophasis thus allows Bernstein to reinforce his belief in his poetic principles, even in the negative, paradoxical act of denouncing them: "I altogether abandon the false opinion that abnormal poetry techniques such as fragmentation, dissociation, discontinuity, collage, disjunction, seriality, constellation, and unnatural constraints of whatever kind have any contribution to make to poetic craft" (*Attack* 276).

As Bernstein delivers his testimony and pleads his case ("I was wrong, I apologize, I recant"), he offers a pseudo-apology in the tradition of William Carlos William's poem "This is Just to Say," wherein Williams seeks to make amends for eating plums his wife presumably was saving for herself. Williams' non-apology ends with a request for clemency that suggests little remorse: "Forgive me /they were delicious /so sweet /and so cold" (74). Bernstein's apology is equally ironic and equivocal, a quality that the poet signals with his punning permutations of the word *recant*: "I am filled with regret and overcome with the error of my ways, for I have preferred the crooked path over the straight, the bent over the upright, the hunched over the erect. I recant my cant. I recant and cant my recantation" (*Attack* 277). Beyond the repetition and histrionics of the speech, Bernstein's use of the word *cant* reveals an especially adept attention to language. For while *cant* can mean "hypocritical and sanctimonious talk," to which Bernstein spuriously admits, it also connotes, as a transitive verb, to slant, to "set at an angle" or "tilt obliquely" and, as an intransitive verb, "to beg in a singsong manner."

"Recantorium" is Bernstein's indirect, intentionally unapologetic song, which seeks "forgiveness" for acts he has had no (real) shame in committing. The word *cant*, moreover, functions as a homophone for *can't* and thus inheres within itself a clue to Bernstein's strategy and use of rhetorical negation. With the very language it uses, Bernstein's apology announces its irony, simultaneously calling into question the sincerity of his words and illustrating the efficacy of negation as a rhetorical tool.

If, as Bernstein sees it, the geopolitical metaphor of the hegemonic and subaltern currently obtains as a description for the current state of poetry, one wonders what an alternative poetic model might be, and for Bernstein, it is the idea of a commonwealth. At the start of "Recantorium," Bernstein invokes the image of a large social body, framing himself as being but one constituent within "the entire Poetry Commonwealth" (*Attack* 271). The concept of a "poetry commonwealth," implying as it does a multiplicity of states or groups, registers the true vastness and variety of poetry production—divided into so many subgroups. Bernstein's social and aesthetic model of an ideal commonwealth, however, must necessarily include discord; it is a space in which arguing is essential and ideas are in flux. At a key moment in "Recantorium," Bernstein makes a modest claim for the benefits of argument, as he admits to having taken issue in his career with "sometimes perfectly reasonable views and perspectives, with which I have had cause to quarrel, and whose only crime is my disagreement" (*Attack* 281). This statement, arguably the least caustic and ironic comment within all of "Recantorium," is meant as a corrective to the uncivil verbal attacks that Bernstein perceives his opponents have made against his poetry and person. Bernstein's acknowledgement of other "reasonable views" also subtly yet significantly affirms his belief in healthy debate and a continuous working through of political and aesthetic differences.

Consistent with Jamesian pluralism, Bernstein's notion of a poetry commonwealth or polis that he raises in "Recantorium" promotes a skeptical, contentious version of poetic community. Bernstein's critique of hegemonic uniformity in Official Verse Culture thus extends as well to alternative poetry movements, who "need not seek to replace other conventions in quest of becoming the new standard" (*A Poetics* 219). Such wariness of group orthodoxy constitutes the subject of Bernstein's poem "Solidarity is the Name We Give to What We Cannot Hold." The negation within the title asserts not just the impossibility of a singular, uniform banner under poets might write but also its undesirability. "Solidarity," like many of Bernstein's other poems, is an ironic work, whose humorous gestures aim to

acknowledge variety of poetic practices and movements undertaken in opposition to the homogeneity of "official verse culture" and, at the same time, to deride group affiliations too ardently held by some poets:

> I am a nude formalist poet, a sprung
> syntax poet, a multitrack poet, a
> wondering poet, a social expressionist
> poet, a Baroque poet, a constructivist poet,
> an ideolectical poet. I am a New York poet in
> California, a San Francisco poet on
> the Lower East side, an Objectivist poet
> in Royaumont, a surrealist poet in New Jersey (*My Way* 33)

The rest of the poem carries on in similar fashion, with Bernstein embracing various poetic identities and possible influences and sending up others ("nude formalism" substitutes for New Formalism). Bernstein also pushes beyond a pluralism composed of mere labels. The poem's title, "Solidarity is the Name We Give to What We Cannot Hold," which questions the viability of poetic coalitions among disparate groups, also introduces dissonance into the idea of group identity itself. Bernstein emphasizes disjunction in the identities he invokes, by collapsing disparate regional locations and aesthetic labels (the state of California and the New York School) and by claiming ideologically opposed identities (as both "a bourgeois poet at Zabar's, a union poet /in Albany") (*My Way* 34). He also alludes to the reductiveness of labels themselves: "I am a language /poet wherever people try to limit the modes of /expression or nonexpression" (*My Way* 34).

In a final, negating gesture, toward the end of "Solidarity," Bernstein will evacuate all of the affiliations he has just claimed, jettisoning the very category of identity with a series of negations:

> & I am none of these things,
> nothing but the blank wall of my aversions
> writ large in disappearing ink (*My Way* 35)

Bernstein's use of the ampersand, here, is telling and pivotal: he at once upholds the idea of a pluralistic poetry commonwealth or polis *and* performs an act of radical negation of group identity. This negation, though, is not a full rejection of pluralism (as the ampersand implies) but a reiteration

of his commitment to dissension. Poetry collectives, as Bernstein writes in his essay, "A Conspiracy of Us," need to "call the strictures into question," especially as a "kind of blinder's vision begins as we look at the world in terms of the [group] configurations being made" (*Content's Dream* 344; 345). Bernstein's aversions, "writ large in disappearing ink," remain true to the etymological origin of *averse*; they are acts of turning away—and dissenting—from convention and standardization and maintain a skeptical edge in an endeavor to hold all poetic principles and social beliefs under scrutiny.

Drawing from what Bernstein has to say in "Recantorium" and "Solidarity," his conception of utopia is not one in which the prevailing poetic establishment is necessarily eradicated or in which every possible "alternative" or experimental poetry group has equal footing in a nominally representative, politely accommodating commonwealth. Rather Bernstein's ideal social body and poetic polis must entail not merely the elimination of poetic homogeneity, nor, for that matter, the promotion of multiplicity in name only but the fostering of a pluralism informed by argument and dissent. Bernstein's polis would thus cohere with what Fredric Jameson argues is a "new form" of utopian literature, one that depends upon discord to drive its vision forward. Such a social model:

> reorganize[s] itself around the increasingly palpable fact and situation of ideological
>
> multiplicity and radical difference in the field of desire. Utopia now begins to include all those bitter disputes around alternative diagnoses of social miseries and the solutions proposed to overcome them; and the formal center of gravity then begins to shift precisely to the question of those differences . . . (*Archaeologies* 216)

A key for this utopian plan is that the plurality of differences leads not to unremitting disorder but instead encourages debate about the variety of ways and best means to address social and cultural ills. As Jameson contends, what is utopian "is no longer the invention and defense of a specific floorplan, but rather the story of all the arguments about how Utopia should be constructed in the first place. It is no longer the exhibit of an achieved Utopian construct, but rather the story of its production and of the very process of construction itself" (*Archaeologies* 217). Bernstein's discordant, argumentative poetry, replete with many instances of dissent from poetic convention, then is at one

and the same time an enactment of his utopian politics, wherein protest and disagreement might spur on literary and social change.

Bernstein's later poetry at times seems driven by an imperative that he will take a softer tack with his audience, an approach that could alter perceptions of him as an *enfant terrible* of poetry of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In "The Difficult Poem," Bernstein even adopts the tone of a writer of self-help books, advising the reader not to "let the poem intimidate you! Often the difficult poem will provoke you, but this may be its way of getting your attention. Sometimes, if you give your full attention to the poem, the provocative behavior will stop" (*Attack* 5). Bernstein's gentle advice to his reader is shot through with irony, and the stance is, of course, a ruse; one still discerns an acerbic jab at those who read formally experimental poetry as impenetrable. Yet, like a Möbius strip that folds back on itself, Bernstein's ironic message also gives way to a truth and even a moment of sincerity: he does want to suggest to his readers that his poems and, others like them, demand attention, but this should neither be scary nor unrewarding. Though convoluted, Bernstein's logic of irony is an attempt to disarm his reader, an unexpected invitation to engage, and be at ease, with formally experimental poetry and its "difficulty": "Learning to cope with a difficult reading of a poem will often be more fulfilling than sweeping difficulties under the carpet . . . " (*Attack* 5).

Bernstein might even go so far as to persuade us that his poetry is not only *not* difficult but also agreeable, as in "Thank You For Saying Thank You," when he suggests that the poem we are reading "is a totally /accessible poem. /There is nothing /in this poem /that is in any /way difficult /to understand" (*Girly Man* 7). Bernstein's predilection for apophasis tells us that the matter is not so simple, that even the claims of accessibility turn upon intricate ironies that the reader must navigate. The denial of the poem's difficulty is actually a complicated appeal to the reader not to treat a poem and its language as transparent nor its meaning as straightforward and given. Bernstein later writes in "Thank You":

> This poem
> represents the hope
> for a poetry
> that doesn't turn
> its back on
> the audience, that
> doesn't think it's
> better than the reader (*Girly Man* 9)

The reader should readily surmise that Bernstein here echoes the claims that his critics have made against his poetry in the past. The rhetorical negations are, moreover, subtle acts of denial: not only will he refute claims of elitism, but Bernstein will affirm the reader's ability to withstand a bit of rhetorical difficulty within a poem. For all the irony and excessive politeness in "Thank You For Saying Thank You," for all of its moments of serial negation, it is a poem of affirmation and utopian insistence, offering a pledge of hopefulness and making a promise that it will not "turn /its back on /the audience."

A single caveat guides Bernstein's ideal city: the citizens of his poetic polis must continuously foster disagreement so as to avoid the pitfalls of an entrenched orthodoxy. Were Bernstein to build this polis, he would likely follow architectural plans that were printed in the form of a large Möbius strip, the paper needing to be turned over again and again, just as the thinking for what constitutes an innovative and good society needs to be turned over. The design for his polis would be, then, properly open-ended and ongoing, never final and never resolved. When it came time, moreover, for debates, whether political or poetical, in the polis, and that time would be perpetually present, Bernstein would be there, making apophatic remarks—professing one thing but meaning another—and hoping against hope that there would be someone there who would argue with him.

Notes

1. Bernstein subsequently published these lines from "The Republic of Reality," as a stand-alone poem entitled "This Line" in *All the Whiskey in Heaven* in 2010.
2. "What makes official verse culture official is that it denies the ideological nature of its practice while maintaining hegemony in terms of major media exposure and academic legitimation and funding. At any moment its resiliency is related to its ability to strategically incorporate tokens from competing poetry traditions and juggle them against one another while leaving for itself the main turf" (*Content's Dream* 249).
3. The situation, however, approaches the Kafkan when another poet, Reginald Shepherd, in an entry on the web blog for the *Poetry Foundation*, scolds Bernstein for employing discourse that would compare the AWP with fascism when, in fact, the target of the parody is Fenza's loose use of terms like "parasites" who harm society and his dismissal of the moral rectitude of Language poets and critics who practice literary theory.

CHAPTER 5

Pages to Come: Utopian Longing and the Merging of the Detective Story with the Artist's Novel in Alice Notley's *Disobedience*

Abstract This chapter examines how Alice Notley forges a utopian poetics from an unlikely fusion of the hard-boiled detective genre with the *kunstlerroman*, or artist's novel. Lagapa contends that Notley draws on the detective novel to depict the utopian imagination: a detective's sudden illumination into a mystery, as Ernst Bloch has argued, is equivalent to gaining utopian insight. The artist's novel likewise yields a glimpse into the utopian, for its narrative also records an epiphany, leading to new a work of art and, potentially, a better future. Finding inspiration in the skeptical, acerbic figure of the hard-boiled detective, Notley herself experiences an artistic breakthrough, creating a disobedient poetics whose negative properties lead to a utopian discovery in the unwritten pages of her book.

Keywords Alice Notley · Detective Novel · Artist's Novel · Utopia Negation · Ernst Bloch

Colportage, a French term for the types of reading material—magazines, cookbooks, romance novels, children's books, and newspapers—that a travelling book peddler or *colporteur* might sell, carries with it connotations of being a "lower" form of cultural text, something widely disseminated and meant for popular consumption. Ernst Bloch invokes the concept of colportage in one of his more renowned essays,

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"A Philosophical View of the Detective Novel," yet no derogation surfaces in his usage. Bloch argues that colportage such as the detective novel has merits of its own that make it worthy of appreciation: "the detective novel . . . partak[es] of the peculiar form of 'colportage,' a form that consistently preserves significations long excluded from 'better' literature, and that is not to be equated with kitsch or trash. What is meant are all those familiar detective landscapes of listening, knocking, surprising, interpreting clues, and sudden illumination, all of which make the legitimate thriller possible" (*Utopian Function* 249). Colportage was, as Jack Zipes remarks, a favorite term of Bloch's because the colporteur's materials "catered to the dreams and wishes of lower-class readers who looked for something totally outside their ordinary routines" and thereby spurred the imagination to think the world could be other than it is (*Utopian Function* xxxvii). For Bloch, colportage encompassed, despite its humble status as literature, the promise of a realization of utopian ideals. As Zipes further explains, Bloch understood that the subject matter of these populist materials was less important than what colportage represented, for "they addressed the hunger of the imagination of people whose wants he felt must be respected" (*Utopian Function* xxxvii).

Alice Notley's *Disobedience* reveals a similarly discerning appreciation of the genre of the detective novel particularly as one of the main narrative elements of this book-length poem—Notley's relocation from the United States to the European city of Paris—relies heavily upon genre conventions of hard-boiled detective novels. Notley builds in *Disobedience* what Amy Moorman Robbins has called a "noir landscape," using "stock plot devices" of detective fiction so that "the affective tenor of the low genre suddenly perva[des] the space of the poem" (88). However, while the use of a detective storyline is a "nod to noir conventions," Robbins also notes that Notley mobilizes them in an especially ironic fashion, "such that they work against their own grain" (88–9). Indeed, rather than solely invoking the familiar motifs of detective fiction in a reverent manner, Notley parodies the form, adding wit, humor, and surreal imagery to create her own version of an odd, dream-filled detective story that chronicles her expatriate existence in Paris.

To drive home the parodic nature of her book, Notley invents a persona, Mitch Hardwood, who acts as her guide in Paris. As his name implies, Mitch Hardwood is a caricature of Robert Mitchum, the actor who played detective Philip Marlowe in film versions of Raymond Chandler's novels like *The Big Sleep* and *Farewell My Lovely*. Notley's

Hardwood, who is also called several alternate names including "Hardon" and "Hardwill," is an overwrought image of the type of gruff, callous masculinity integral to much hard-boiled detective fiction, yet this cynical stance is something that Notley adapts for her own ends: she uses a detective's skeptical tone and negative outlook to register her distrust of, and resistance to, social and literary institutions with which she disagrees. Notley laces the speech within her poetry with terse, critical pronouncements, using negative phrases and speech common to an embittered detective to articulate her indignation for authority and to express her dismay with society and the literary establishment. The acerbic detective figure is an apposite choice for such a purpose. As Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones contend, the "bluntness and cynical tone [of typical hard-boiled detectives] give a feeling of straightforwardness and authenticity" and "implies a refusal to engage with and become implicated in the corrupt world that surrounds them" (123).

Disobedience, though, is not only a detective story. Steeped in dream logic and dream imagery, Notley's book condenses several literary modes into one work—all of which commingle with the text's detective motifs: *Disobedience* is at once a travelogue, a social commentary on Parisian culture and politics, a revision of the epic poem tradition, a personal memoir, and a *kunstlerroman*, or novel of the artist, written in verse. This last narrative category of the novel of the artist reinforces the relevance of Bloch's utopian thinking for a reading of *Disobedience*, for Bloch pairs his essay on the detective genre with a companion piece devoted to the artist's novel. The detective novel and the artist's novel are, as Bloch writes in "A Philosophical View of the Novel of the Artist," related genres and flip sides of the same coin: both are geared toward discovery, with one focused primarily on the past and the other directed toward the future: "Whereas the detective novel requires a process of collecting evidence, penetrating backward to a past crime, the novel of the artist requires recognition of and interest in the creative person who brings something new instead of something past" (*Utopian Function* 267). The mode of searching in both the detective novel and the artist's novel, Bloch argues, is a fitting means for depicting utopia, whose latent characteristics can be revealed through allegorical acts of discovery. Though pointed in opposite temporal directions, each genre addresses the utopian impulse, whether it is to be resurrected from the past in the investigation of a mystery or realized in the future through a discovery initiated by the artist's creative process.

In its unorthodox adaptation of the mystery novel, *Disobedience* does not rigidly adhere to the conventional plot of the detective story—in which there is a discovery of a dead body, a suspenseful and lengthy investigation in which clue after clue is found, and a revelation of the murderer's identity through the deduction of the detective, yet Notley does weigh events and inspects scenes as if she were a detective, with an eye toward determining the nature of the world and her place within it. Notley will draw on and investigate her own past (and her relation to the literary past) as part of the mystery narrative of *Disobedience*, and the ensuing sense of discovery unveils itself in a manner consistent with utopian thought. As Fredric Jameson argues, Bloch's fundamental insight into detective fiction as it relates to utopia is the way in which the solving of a mystery unfolds from its relation to the past, wherein the "riddle . . . is answered, not at the beginning, but at the very fulfillment of time itself" (*Marxism and Form* 131). Unveiling over time what was previously unknown and mysterious, the disclosure of truths in a detective novel, Jameson explains, thus projects something akin "to the moment when the world passes over into Utopia, and when the final Utopian destination returns upon the past to confer a sense of direction upon it" (*Marxism and Form* 131). Though Notley's adaptation of the hard-boiled detective genre yields an unconventional mystery, one that is ambiguous, diffuse, and informed as much by existential and artistic questions as criminal acts, *Disobedience* does move from past to the present and beyond, chronicling the course of utopian progression as it is symbolically tied to Notley's discovery of self and work.

The *kunstlerroman* sections that complement *Disobedience*'s detective storyline, by contrast, revolve around questions regarding the future and concern Notley's poetic process, charting her progress toward the completion of a book of poetry that she is writing. The future-oriented direction of Notley's desire to finish her book, though, similarly offers a plotline consistent with the advancement of utopian ideals. In his gloss on Bloch's "A Philosophical View of the Novel of the Artist," Jameson remarks that it is the procedural, work-in-progress subject matter of the artist's novel that indicates its utopian impulses, for the unfinished work of art itself encompasses the potential of what could be:

> For Bloch, . . . this emptiness of the work within a work, this blank canvas at the center, is the very locus of the not-yet-existent itself; and it is precisely this essentially fragmentary and aesthetically unsatisfying structure of the

> novel of the artist which gives it its ontological value as a form and figure of the movement of the future incomplete before us. (*Marxism and Form* 132)

Throughout *Disobedience*, Notley will interrogate the act of writing and set out to discover both the purpose of her poetry and her place within the literary world. All the while, Notley treats her progress toward completion of the book as anything but given; it is a precarious struggle that threatens to overwhelm her. As Bloch argues, though, it is the uncertainty around the work of the artist that gives the *kunstlerroman* its aesthetic and utopian value; the artist's novel is "filled with desire and volition" and makes its "optimal wish" contingent upon "defeat or victory" in the attempt to create a work of art (*Utopian Function* 269). In accord with the artist's novel, Notley invests her book with a sense both of torment and hope about its future viability, and the precariousness of composing and completing *Disobedience* will relate not only to the future of her book but to the utopian direction of society as well.

The *kunstlerroman* and detective motifs of *Disobedience* both correlate closely to what Notley has termed the poetics of disobedience, which is an aesthetics of negation that drives her work. Notley describes this negative, defiant stance as something that developed from the very process of writing *Disobedience*, whose "tone throughout was one of rejection of everything I was supposed to be or to affirm, *all* the poetries all the groups the clothes the gangs the governments the feelings and reasons" ("The Poetics of Disobedience"). As Maggie Nelson says, "*Disobedience* develops a poetics of pure grouchiness—an audacious endeavor with few or no precursors" (165). The powerful, repudiating tone of Notley's disobedient poetics, stylized as it is within the text of the poem, owes a good deal to the detective genre, yet Notley's negating speech also modifies itself, subsequently shifting its focus to matters of art. The mannerisms of the hard-boiled detective thus coincide with, and eventually give way to, the protesting voice of the artist who challenges social and literary orthodoxy.

As a poet of disobedience, Notley's aesthetic imperative is, in her words, to "GET RID OF ALL CONTROLS," a mantra that registers her wariness of established social rules and the protocols of the literary world. The target of Notley's critical defiance is mostly external, aimed chiefly at male-dominated institutions that have historically dictated social norms and determined literary esteem. With its repudiation of patriarchal authority, Notley's poetry, Zoe Skoulding has argued, offers insight into "how . . . [one might] think and imagine beyond the structures of male

power" (90). However, the protesting stance that Notley adopts is not solely directed outward; it also culminates in, and expresses itself most profoundly, in an act of self-abnegation. Notley arrives at a realization that her work is dependent upon stripping away aspects of her self to get toward the type of poetry she wants to write. As Notley gets closer to finishing her work, she aims to reduce herself down to an unadorned selfhood, and from such a position of self-negation, to offer a means of renewal for herself and the world.

Disobedience begins, like many detective mysteries, in *medias res*, but the act that initiates the poem's narrative is not the sighting of a dead body but Notley's declaration of expatriation. Notley makes the announcement of her move from the United States to Paris in abrupt, negative terms, and it is Notley's cynical tone and negative rhetoric that fuse together the genres of detective fiction and the artist's novel in *Disobedience*. The mystery that inaugurates *Disobedience* amounts to a missing person's case, with Notley herself at the center of the mystery:

> moved here for no reason. don't seem to be anywhere
> That's better.
> & the only
> thing American really
> worth bringing is the sense
> that you must accept me, exactly.
> Not as your woman. (*Disobedience* 3)

Initially, Notley founders in rationalizing or making sense of her relocation to Paris; her thoughts are, as a result, awash in negative statements. Notley's recognition that "no reason" really compelled her move leaves her musing absently to herself: "don't seem to be anywhere." Though Notley ultimately finds a release in her expatriation ("that's better"), she truculently proclaims the last vestige of her American identity firmly and in the negative: France must take her as she is and "Not as [anybody's] woman."

The subsequent lines in the passage further reinforce the rhetoric of negation, depicting Notley's departure as befitting a femme fatale. There is, Notley suggests, something seemingly nefarious or dangerous, if not outright criminal, about her taking leave of America: "Sinister crisis/crux— /make loss? . . . //No, but . . . portend . . . footsteps /through door, to left /I left I left the U.S. (I created more loss)" (*Disobedience* 3). Bewildered and anxious,

Notley conveys a sense of duress in her flight from her home country. While such plotlines seem fitting for a detective story, the circumstances also aptly suggest the crisis of identity that might surround the struggles of a writer: "I had left the American poetry masons in their burntdown hall" (*Disobedience* 3). Here, Notley articulates her distrust of institutions, referring to poetry as a mysterious Masonic cabal, whose insular ways left no room for her, inspiring—so it is implied—an act of literary vandalism ("burntdown hall").

Notley's choice to live as an expatriate, it would seem, correlates closely with her general distrust of the Anglo-American literary tradition, and she gives voice to her frustration with those who expect a compulsory reverence for literary monuments: "People keep trying to foist Greats on me—oh /Wordsworth Melville Langston Hughes, James Joyce, or /some girl, Bradstreet Dickinson, Stein Toni Morrison /Fuck'em" (*Disobedience* 92). Uninterested in the canon, Notley endeavors to discover or investigate her own selfhood instead, affirming that "deep deep inside me, in the caverns /I haven't heard of them. I've only heard of the unnamed there /What will France do will it change my story?" (spacing in original, *Disobedience* 92–3). Notley's language here wryly mixes police vernacular with that of a writer: to change one's story not only suggests a criminal's guilty conscience but also indicates the artist's prerogative to create the world anew.

Notley's first direct reference to detective fiction in *Disobedience* comes in the form of a dream, and appropriate to the logic of dreams, Notley both participates in, and distorts, detective genre conventions, as she makes herself a split, androgynous figure at the center of events: "I dream I'm a detective a man /trying to catch a woman" (*Disobedience* 5). As with many dreams, though, Notley does not occupy just one role within her reverie; her pursuit of the "woman" seems to be a search for her own identity. As *Disobedience* proceeds, Notley's investigation thus becomes as much a figure for a deep inquiry into the ontological matter of being and identity as it is an investigation of any crime.

Indeed, Notley's identity will frequently modulate and transform, as she recurrently endeavors to come to terms with herself: "Define soul: I am soul //Look on the wall: Elelse" (*Disobedience* 6). A punning permutation of her own first name, "Elelse" conveys the slipperiness of the poet's identity: she is Alice/Elelse; she is, also, *else*where (in Paris), and, lastly, something *else* as well—a soul rather than a mere body. *Disobedience* thus effectively works as an example of a metaphysical detective story, a

subgenre that Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney argue is distinguished "by the profound questions that it raises about narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality, and the limits of knowledge" (1). Questions about identity continue to unfurl themselves in the rest of the fragmented storyline of *Disobedience* as Notley persists in her feverish attempts to grasp exactly who she is. Uncertainty seems to abound at the core of Notley's being, a situation that befits the objective of metaphysical detective stories. As Michael Holquist explains: "If, in the detective story, death must be solved, in the new metaphysical detective story it is life which must be solved" (155).

Notley's query into the relation of body to soul, moreover, deepens the mystery elements of *Disobedience*, as the book segues into the familiar, first trope of much detective fiction, the finding of a body:

> People come by often ask, "Who's on ice in the back?"
> It will be I or me or one, of course, or "Soul is it Soul?" does Soul die? (*Disobedience* 8)

Amidst the familiarly brusque vernacular of the hard-boiled detective novel ("Who's on ice"), Notley drops abruptly into a weighty meditation on ontological questions. Notley's tone shifts here from subdued recognition of herself ("It will be I or me or one") to a note of dreamlike panic, reminiscent of an anxious individual at a crowded crime scene ("'Soul is it Soul?' does Soul die?").

As the scene further evolves, Notley will play other parts as well; formerly the dead body at the crime site, Notley subsequently performs the role of the detective sent to investigate it:

> At the bottom in shallow water is a body the death mask
> of a man, a poet, the poet, still a man. I won't care then
> or will I, detective or soul. Soul cares for. (*Disobedience* 8)

The cynical detachment of the hard-boiled detective determines Notley's reaction, as she claims momentarily not to be concerned for the victim when the body next is discovered to be both male and a poet. Such a hardened, negative stance ("I won't care then") does not last long, though. Her self-interrogation leads to a reaffirmation of her identification with the soul and its *modus operandi*: the imperative to care. Cleaving to the properties of the soul offers Notley an alternative to the cold

indifference characteristic of the hard-boiled detective and lays the groundwork for *Disobedience* later to develop more properly as a novel of the artist in verse, with the soul becoming the figure for, or site of, the poet or artist's aesthetic sensibilities.

Notley's investigation of her dream about a crime scene, in which she simultaneously occupies the position of victim and the police officer and the detective and poet, sets in motion other, corresponding investigative acts. The ongoing search that Notley undertakes pushes her further and further back in time, evincing Bloch's belief that the detective novel is always oriented toward the past. As Bloch writes, "In the detective novel the crime has already occurred, outside the narrative; the story arrives on the scene with the corpse. It does not develop its cause during the narrative or alongside it, but its sole theme is the discovery of something that happened *ante rem*" (*Utopian Function* 255). Looking into matters *Ante rem*, "before that" or "prior to the act," to seek its solution of the crime, the detective finds her purpose tracing matters that increasingly stretch back in time.

Accordingly, this leads Notley delve into the past and into questions about Paris and her role within it. The city of Paris, with its catacombs and underground spaces, will come to function itself as a figure for time, the levels below Paris representing the sedimentary layer of one era upon another. As Notley ventures further, she begins to associate the caves with an earlier time and place, as Paris becomes—in the dreamwork of her poem—primordial Babylon: "Caves. Going down to beautiful words descending to rosettes /I want to follow /a delightful path /Inside this petalled swamp or Sumer" (*Disobedience* 27). Caught up in her exploration of the past, Notley imagines Paris/Babylon enveloping her, a negative state which initially causes her to recoil from what she finds: "Hardshroud I mean Hardwood /says of course the city is my shroud /if you unwrap it Babylon ugly /Ninevah, Ur ugly" (*Disobedience* 26). Trapped momentarily in the city's folds, Notley endeavors to unwrap herself from all that she finds ugly and disturbingly confining about her life prior to coming to Paris. Her ensuing investigation into the past readily coincides, then, with the matter of discovering her identity amidst the social structures that bind her, a task that becomes imperative for Notley: "Trying to find or be a dark woman. the soul I am" (*Disobedience* 17).

Sorting through issues from the past requires Notley to find a point of origin. Having conflated Paris and Babylon, Notley subsequently invokes

the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish* as a way to search out her self and the nature of her being. An epic battle between gods for dominance, *Enuma Elish* ultimately relates how, the body of Tiamat, the goddess of the ocean or saltwater, is rent in two at her death, creating both heaven and earth. Addressing the starting point of time itself, the renowned first lines of *Enuma Elish*, pinpoint a moment prior to the existence of the cosmos, and Notley quotes them in relation to the beginning of her own selfhood:

> Enuma elish la nabu shamamu
> the caesura comes after elish.
> A-lice Elishabeth Caesar.
> "When there was no heaven, no earth, no height, no depth, no name . . . "
> Wasn't I there partaking how lovely with you. (*Disobedience* 31)

Related in a series of negations, the first lines of *Enuma Elish* initiate a radical temporal rupture, when neither heaven nor earth existed. Notley similarly comprehends her time in Paris in light of a temporal break; splitting from America and relocating to France allows Notley to begin again. Notley even transforms the words of *Enuma Elish* and its formal break, its caesura, into a new and triumphant identity, A-lice Elishabeth Caesar, that embodies the split. Locating a discrete and novel point of origin for Notley's being within a temporal break, *Disobedience* comes even more fully to exhibit features of a metaphysical detective story: Notley attempts to solve her life by imagining her present existence in Paris as effecting a break, an existence distinct from troubles left behind in America and a poetic career separate from its stifling canonical strictures.

The unexpected invocation of *Enuma Elish* alongside the detective mystery motifs in *Disobedience* should seem less confounding in light of Bloch's essay on detective fiction. Bloch argues that ancient texts like *Oedipus Rex* and other "*early great works of literature*" share the "principal earmark of the detective story, the darkness at the beginning" (256). As Bloch explains, common to *Oedipus Rex* and detective stories is an initial criminal or violent act, an "'X' that precedes the beginning, waiting in the wings, which leads from the dark pre-lude, the unknown pre-history, into the narrative" (*Utopian Function* 256). Oedipus' "increasingly pressing and urgent investigations carried out in the interest of his people and his own security from the murderer" are thus, for Bloch, very much like the actions of a detective (*Utopian Function* 256).

The primordial myth of Tiamat functions as a means for Notley to search out her identity, the nature of which she has found somewhat mysterious and difficult to discern in the midst of relocating to Paris. Tiamat represents the principles of fluidity and change to Notley, and she uses the example of Tiamat to reflect upon her ability to adapt her existence after having left the United States:

> Underground river is what
> chaos, Tiamat becomes.
> I follow her stream through caves
> sit down beside a pool. (*Disobedience* 31)

Notley's tone is one of clarity and realization: out of chaos, out of ambiguity and ill-defined mystery, the river that courses in the caves beneath the streets of Paris forms a sense of new direction for Notley, one she is compelled to explore and investigate. As Notley subsequently relates, the pool provides a glimpse of her own visage and a moment for self-recognition: "My reflection is /'ashes' I want to say—why? /For I see I forthright and youthful" (*Disobedience* 31–2). Conveying a detective's methodical, interpretive curiosity, Notley here expresses her words first with hesitation until a conclusion is ultimately reached: she discovers in herself a being who is "forthright and youthful," an "I" that is renewed and strong, whom she traces far back to her youth.

Notley's navigation of time in the underground pool awakens in her memories of a formidable, youthful inner resolve, and she flashes back to experiences she had while growing up in Needles, California. Needles is stark and sometimes despairing in Notley's memory, yet her youthful flashbacks provide some insight into her later vocation as a poet. Initially, Notley appears to be made distraught by a dream that relates her time growing up in Needles:

> Dream the desert landscape around Needles
> is covered with houses which are shutters or slits
> in the hills and on the level ground.
> Eyes burying themselves alive. I'm disgusted . . . (*Disobedience* 188)

The nightmarish scenario of Needles is one of overdetermined discomfiture for Notley, as she imagines her hometown covered with houses that have the menacing appearance eyes. The disgust that Notley experiences

in the dream stems from feelings about Needles being a small, insular town, populated with people who could not, or refused, "to see" and chose instead to bury "themselves alive." The dream is an obscure and idiosyncratic one, a clue so abstruse that it almost seems a red herring that further cloaks the nature of her true identity.

However, Notley's investigation into the town of Needles, which is situated in the Mohave Desert, also connects her to the region's earliest inhabitants, the Mohave Indians, whose cultural beliefs about dreaming provide Notley with a foundation for her poetry. Notley's dream memory of her childhood in Needles is thus no mere matter of coincidence. For the Mohaves, dreams constitute an epistemology, a way of understanding and knowing that Notley hopes to emulate in her poetry:

> The Mohaves believe that all knowledge
> is dreamed and not learned. Or they did
> believe that. A Mohave has to dream
> for her or him self
> everything that Mohaves have always known. (*Disobedience* 191)

The prevalence of dreams in *Disobedience* and Notley's other poems suggests an affinity that the poet recognizes between herself and the Mohaves and explains the sense of alienation that Notley experienced in Needles as a young person among those who could not or were unwilling to see. Notley discovers from the search into her past an integral truth about her identity: the appreciation for dreams and the knowledge that dreams might bring.

The detective work that Notley has accomplished thus solves an integral mystery of her being by identifying herself as a person who harnesses the power of her dreams to bring knowledge of the world and of her self into being. As Notley writes, "How I am, what I know —it feels like it, mostly, /came to me in a dream . . . To change the world, as I always say, /change the forms in our dreams" (*Disobedience* 192). Notley's investigation into both her immediate and distant history results in a personal and aesthetic recognition: a missing person no longer, Notley achieves a secured awareness of her present self by connecting to the past. It is such clarity that coheres with the utopian impulses of the text. For Bloch, it is precisely an active and aware reflection upon dreams that yields their utopian content: "[the night] can only say something in so far as it is exposed by waking imagination, by an imagination that is directed towards what is becoming . . . [and] as such . . . it can circulate in

the notions of [a] clear road, . . . a world-improvement, [or] a journey to the end" (*Principle of Hope*, 102).

The function of dreams as it relates to her poetry and knowledge of herself, however, is only a partial resolution of the aesthetic, existential, and utopian concerns raised in *Disobedience*. While Notley comes to terms with how the past informs the present moment and her vocation as a poet, she must also confront the dilemma of how her current existence relates to the future and how her poetry might carry forward. It is at this juncture that a significant shift occurs within the pages of *Disobedience*, when the book might be more productively read as a novel of the artist in verse, a book self-consciously concerned with the making of poetry. As Tim Dayton argues, in his assessment of Bloch's essay on the detective novel, the future is "beyond the provenance of the detective novel to imagine," a circumstance which "imposes the form's cognitive limit" (190). In contrast to the detective story, the artist's novel, oriented as it is toward the future, offers Notley clear direction as she progresses with *Disobedience* and the advancement of its utopian aims carrying forward.

The full implications of utopian thought in *Disobedience* indeed only surface in Notley's negotiation of her creative process going forward as she struggles to complete her book. The troubles Notley has with her book present a formidable obstacle, yet it is, Bloch argues, the overcoming of such difficulties that approximates the sudden illumination and realization of utopian ideals. Notley's creative breakthroughs, then, become quite telling: as Notley forges ahead with her writing, she distills an aesthetic principle that will guide her into the future, a poetics of disobedience that repudiates and negates the social and literary conventions that have constrained her. Notley becomes increasingly intent on aesthetic and individual liberation, and her drive to eradicate barriers to her writing includes, ultimately, a negation of her self, a feat that, once accomplished, lays clear a path toward the future and the completion of her book and stirs her imagination toward the utopian.

In an effort to come to terms with the future, Notley will pivot from her inquiry into her youthful beginnings to a contemplation of what the future might have in store for her:

> does the Past Know the future?
> This dark woman says, Yes, in this game,
> Yes . . . (*Disobedience* 191)

The future concern that preoccupies Notley is the completion of *Disobedience* and her ability to conclude the manuscript that she is writing. It is at this point Notley that speaks with some clarity to the purpose of her poetry, yet she still wonders about its viability, uncertain of its reception by readers: "This is getting to be, finally, /the poem I've always been working on . . . /but can I serve it to everyone, plate of dates? /a drift or myth in all my life's days" (*Disobedience* 194). Notley is wary of the prospects of her poem's success, so much so that she admits "the idea makes me nauseous," and, in forging ahead with *Disobedience*, Notley succumbs to despair, feeling dejected about her book and her life as it relates to the future: "Nothing that's going to happen is of any interest" (*Disobedience* 194).

As she moves forward from the past, Notley's preoccupation with the future coheres with Bloch's insight into the relation between detective fiction and the *kunstlerroman*. Bloch understands the two genres as being borne from a single premise: an act of discovery:

> something is uncanny, that is how it begins. Investigative uncovering [in the detective novel] is indeed only one aspect, aimed at the origin. Investigative edification [in the novel of the artist] is the other, aimed at the destination. There the finding of something that has been, here, [for the artist] the creation of something new: this tense process is often no less labyrinth-like. (*Utopian Function* 262)

An act of artistic illumination—of creative breakthrough—lies behind what Bloch calls the principle of "investigative edification" for the novel of the artist. Not focused on uncovering a murder, a crime, in the past, the artist's novel instead makes the solving of an artistic dilemma central to its plot, whose result is the "artist's work itself, imaginary as it is . . . " (*Utopian Function* 263). The artist's novel thus culminates in an end product, one made possible only through the creative process and an imaginative breakthrough. It is in this manner that the artist's novel functions as an allegory for the beginnings of utopian realization, in which something hitherto unimaginable now seems possible: "all kinds of things appear visible about which a fictitious life and struggle can make one think. The concern of a novel of the artist as such contributes meanings here about which nothing or not enough is perceived" (Bloch, *Utopian Function* 276).

Before the allegorical, redemptive future can be perceived, however, the novel of the artist first must dramatize the difficulty of the creative process. This holds true for *Disobedience* and occasions Notley's use of negative phrasing, as she doubts her capacity to finish her poem. Notley repeatedly wonders if her poem is proceeding as it should, and, in an imagined dialogue between Mitcham and herself, she speaks of being caught or trapped within the creative act:

> I can't get out of this poem
> it's Your poem
> you're making me make it this way
> it's us, this poem is alive
> even if it's ugly or I'm dead
> it's the City of You even if you aren't "in it" (*Disobedience* 83)

The exchange with Mitcham is as much a debate as a negotiation, especially as Notley struggles to come to terms with her creative process and the work itself. The negative rhetoric indicates that Notley feels herself to be at an impasse, though her alter ego Mitcham—now more a muse than a detective—assures her that the poem is possible and "alive." The negative phrasing continues as Notley vacillates between her conviction that the poem comes from herself and a sense that she feels removed from—and dead to—its production. The angst regarding the work of art continues to linger. Much later in *Disobedience,* Notley will admit once more to her creativity faltering, claiming: "I still don't know enough to get out of this poem" (*Disobedience* 248).

Notley consequently entertains thoughts that her project is for naught. Noting that the purpose of poetry has shifted over time, Notley professes uncertainty about what she sets out to achieve with her poetry and again she steeps her language in negative phrasing:

> The function of poetry has changed so much—
> doesn't tell stories, instruct, is not recited as rite,
> does not distill the people's wisdom
> or even prophesy much. What does it
> do then?
> What are You doing? (*Disobedience* 160)

The serial negations in the passage register all that it seems that poetry *cannot* do, reflecting the dejection that Notley feels having lost a sense of her creative direction. Seeking a way out of her impasse, Notley dwells upon ways to end the poem that presents her with so much difficulty: "I might think to end this whole work /if I'd said that five hundred times /but not if I've said it fifty . . . //I have my own rules here" (*Disobedience* 172). Though Notley shows a weary resolve to continue, a persistent desire to quit—to end the poem—rears itself as well, marking a nagging sense of dissatisfaction with the writing process.

Notley's difficulties are, according to Bloch, characteristic of the artist's novel and serve as a prelude for a push toward a creative revelation. Certainly, the novel of the artist is routinely "filled with nights made out of depression," yet it is out of such trials, Bloch contends, that "the other comes, the positive text, for whose sake the novel of the artist may allow itself to be written at all. . . . The adventure of the *breakthrough* occurs, the difficult midsummer day of the new work . . ." (*Utopian Function* 270–1). The driving force behind the *kunstlerroman* is the perseverance of the artist, a determined being whose creativity ensures that "nothing stands in the way of this kind of struggle, to investigate that which cannot be solved. To sketch buildings that were not built . . ." (*Utopian Function* 273). The confrontation with the impossible thus gives the novel of the artist its utopian qualities, as it exhibits a willingness to imagine innovative, hitherto unimaginable solutions to complex problems. Experiencing a pivotal breakthrough, the artist is now able to conceptualize what was up till now nonexistent and thereby bring a fundamental newness into the world.

In such a recursive, nonlinear and fragmentary work like *Disobedience*, numerous occasions arise in which Notley experiences an artistic breakthrough about the purpose of her poetry. All of Notley's creative epiphanies, however, can certainly be related to her imperative, quoted earlier, to "GET RID OF ALL CONTROLS"—versions of which are repeated throughout the text. For instance, Notley at one point articulates, guiding principles for her poetry that tellingly emerge from a moment of despair:

> What a horrible place, dirty mental black space
> That I'm in—suddenly outside of it I close it:
> . . .
> What was I doing in there?

> I can't tell you. Though my rule for this poem
> is honesty, my other rule is Fuck You. (*Disobedience* 158)

Notley's artistic clarity arises from an appraisal of her mental state, and it is the act of a creative investigation that leads to a newfound purpose. While Notley demurs as to the reason why she had descended into her "mental black space," her line of questioning leads to an principle of honesty and a stance of repudiation: an outright rejection of anything that would impede her poem's progress.

Notley's embrace of her caustic attitude and rejection of all that would control her crystallize into the newfound aesthetic program of defiance that informs her book. This program is the result of definitive breakthrough experienced once again in the form of a dream, as she imagines a book project with the word disobedience as its title: "A question of a large package, a big cardboard envelope /entitled DISOBEDIENCE. A member of a girl group /asks me where the comic poet's things are: /DISOBEDIENCE belongs to the comic poet . . . the comic poet's /own book, DISOBEDIENCE" (*Disobedience* 224). In the dream logic of the poem, Notley associates the imperative to be disobedient with another poet's work, yet the scene reveals itself to be, as dreams often do, merely a distortion of the dreamer's own situation. As Notley describes in her essay "The Poetics of Disobedience," the impulse to resist and reject other forms of thinking helped to ground her poem and simplify her understanding of the world and her place in it:

> But more and more as I wrote *Disobedience* I discovered I couldn't go along, with the government or governments, with radicals and certainly not with conservatives or centrists, with radical poetics and certainly not with other poetics, with other women's feminisms, with any fucking thing at all; belonging to any of it was not only an infringement on my liberty but a veil over clear thinking.
>
> ("The Poetics of Disobedience")

Within Notley's aesthetic program of disobedience, there is a radical negation of all things antithetical to her will to create and, in particular, any dogma that would dictate how she must write her poetry.

As an aesthetic program, the poetics of disobedience amounts to a systematic negation in which Notley rejects all that she finds dishonest and detestable in the world, whether these take the form of governmental institutions, political ideologies, social injustice, literary traditions,

patriarchal and sexist practices or, simply, human behavior with which she disagrees. Notley indeed derives much of her poetic purpose in *Disobedience* from being antagonistic:

> I've taken some
> care that this poem not be a nice place.
> . . . nothing to keep one from an
> internal freedom
> which lifts the poem off the whole
> globe and its sleazy little continents— (*Disobedience* 279)

Notley seeks to cultivate within the pages of *Disobedience* a good deal of hostility; she negates the sense of a poem as a "nice place" not out of mere petulance but a belief that a hospitable poem is too restrictive for all of its politeness and decorum.

Being *in*hospitable, on the contrary, assures that there would be "nothing to keep" her or her reader from "an internal freedom" won through acts of disobedience. Notley will, consequently, take her antagonistic attitude further, wishing to negate and eradicate anyone's smug sense of righteousness:

> death to your piety, intelligence
> your efforts on behalf of your people;
> death to your delicate feelings
> death to your honor, death to your anarchy
> death to your ancient customs, your
> lovely usages, your criminality;
> death to your goodness (*Disobedience* 278)

Notley dismisses these attributes, principles, and more in a cascading anaphora negating all sorts of ideals and behaviors, so much so that the catalog seems indiscriminate and unrelenting.

Such all-encompassing negation, however, is by design. So thorough is Notley's disobedient impulse to reject and negate that she will apply the same principle even to her own poetry and its poetics. Notley seeks to reduce the artistic or poetic impulse to its bare minimum so as to provide clarity to what she sees and what she will set down on paper as an artist. Giving herself counsel about the purpose of her poetry, Notley writes:

> if you never quite let it be a poem
> you might write one (*Disobedience* 274)

Notley's advice to herself is yet another tack in her poetics of disobedience, as she tries to ward off thinking of poetry according to some preconceived notion and to avoid treating poetry as precious. Earlier in *Disobedience*, Notley expresses such an opinion, relaying that she "[d]reamed of a poetry institution /several rooms, resembling a bank, windows with grilles. /there are no bathrooms. If you must shit /do it at the threshold between rooms a veil descends" (*Disobedience* 207).

Wary of the control the institution of poetry might wield, Notley's dream conveys her distrust about poetry being too "nice" a place, one that ignores the reality of physical body and its functions in favor of an elevated, pristine, and bodiless concept of poetic beauty. Notley's disobedience will not let her abide such niceties, as her dream continues: "I shit at a couple of thresholds but /finally get to leave, skip out /of the building. Sunshine outside, for a change" (*Disobedience* 207). The intent behind Notley's reference to the human body and its functions is to attack what she sees as the exclusive, elitist tendencies of the literary establishment. It is a strategy similar to one employed by Francois Rabelais, whose grotesque images of excrement formed what Mikhail Bakhtin called the "defecation series" (Bakhtin 175). Rabelais' references to the grotesque, Bakhtin argued, was not done for the sake of being crass; instead, these references aimed to deliver a social critique by "destroying the established hierarchy of values, at bringing down the high and raising the low, at destroying . . . the habitual picture of the world" (Bakhtin 177).

Though the negative, rejecting stance that Notley adopts with her disobedient poetics might appear ruthless, crude, or sweeping in its criticism of most everything, she does not view negativity itself as a stark, meritless enterprise. On the contrary, negativity, for Notley, is productive, providing clarity and direction for her art:

> It leads further and further in—
> this negativity is the truth the way out is out the
> other side who knows where but no where anyone's ever
> been. Optimism is irrelevant. The journey through
> bitter thought, is important. (*Disobedience* 107)

The language that Notley uses to describe negativity, which "leads further and further in," initially suggests being trapped, weighed down by tormented emotions, yet Notley espouses her critical,

negative outlook for the lucidity it supplies. Her rejection of optimism as irrelevant only solidifies why she appreciates negativity so much; in the poetics of disobedience, the arduous process of thinking through negativity obviates the need to be polite and leads to an exacting determination of the truth.

Notley's transformation of negativity from an impediment into a means of moving forward is akin to Bloch's argument about negation and the operations of utopian thought. As Jameson points out, Bloch considered a negative stance as integral to utopian thinking:

> the conversion mechanism used by Bloch consists in a changing of valences, a translation from negative to positive, which suggests the deeper underlying principle that every negative in some fashion implies a positive which is ontologically prior to it; indeed, that every negative may therefore serve as a means of access to that positive which it conceals. (*Marxism and Form*, 132–3).

Notley's journey "through bitter /thought" likewise charts a path from the negative to the positive, and her disobedient poetics—premised upon defiance and disagreeability—allow her to perceive the right way forward. Notley, in her negative critique of the world, also echoes Bloch's belief in the proper function of a skeptical outlook: "But what is true is that each and every criticism of imperfection, incompleteness, intolerance, and impatience already without a doubt presupposes the conception of, and longing for, a possible perfection" (*Utopian Function* 16).

Neither Bloch nor Notley, however, conceive of the positivity borne from negativity as naïve hope. Just as for Notley "[o]ptimism is irrelevant," Bloch's call for hope, for the drive that would carry society toward the utopian, is fueled by a sense of struggle and measured skepticism: "hope is the opposite of security. It is the opposite of naïve optimism. The category of danger is always within it. This hope is not [mere] confidence" (*Utopian Function* 16). Instead, a belief in progress is only available through a careful, deliberate estimation of what would inhibit or block it. As Bloch says, "[t]here would not be any process [toward achieving utopia] at all if there were not [also] something [present] that should not be so," something against which one must ardently strive (*Utopian Function* 17).

In following a course of negativity, Notley is able to relate her dissatisfaction with the world as it is, framing through this denunciation the utopian implications of her work. Notley admits to having "had, for

some fifteen years, a desire to be /'reborn'" (*Disobedience* 165). Renewal is a means for Notley to address utopian ideals, particularly as the impulse for rebirth "comes from my disgust /and fatigue with the world I'm given, as elucidated /in this poem" (*Disobedience* 165). Though Notley might recoil at the world's social ills, its economic disparities, and its ineffectual and corrupt politics, she nevertheless posits the possibility for utopian change:

> Yes I think there could be new definitions
> of art, sexuality, politics, the sacred, social relations—
> they may even be "evolving" right now (*Disobedience* 171).

Wary of being too optimistic, however, Notley will immediately follow this passage with its counterpoint, careful to balance this positive assessment with a negative one, as she soberly acknowledges that "[o]verall, the planet seems to be dying; /everyone has a bomb; /genocidal processes have been stepped up" (*Disobedience* 171). Overwhelmed about the future direction of the world, and the immensity of its problems, Notley compels herself to channel her utopian yearnings solely into matters that are within her immediate control: her writing and her own being.

A course of self-evaluation consequently comes to shape the concluding sections of Notley's "novel" of the artist, and, engaged with the goal of renewal, she tasks herself with a program that begins with her negating the concept of her self. Toward the end of *Disobedience*, Notley writes: "repeat: To start again I have to be nothing" (*Disobedience* 267). In doing so, Notley sets out on a path that one frequently finds in a *kunstlerroman*, the discovery of guiding principles that allow her to create. It is toward the end of her book that Notley arrives at the liberating ideal that she must negate her sense of self:

> Beginning from a single point of
> not knowing what You know,
> . . .
> Close eyes, burrow into body
> Tell me a thing to say, body
> "No origin. Not like."
> Rule now: a careful emptiness. (*Disobedience* 271)

Notley's determined negations of self become the guiding principles of her work, a final act of disobedience that skeptically questions an investment in

selfhood just as radically as she departs from poetic convention. Performing a ritual of self-emptying, Notley attempts to alleviate herself of prior knowledge, taking steps to strip away the thoughts that would confine her.

Notley hits upon, in her negation of the self, a realization about how she wants to move forward with her writing and her interactions with the world. It is, for Notley, "the beginning of a new /spiritual and ethical position," forged by her code of defiance (*Disobedience* 272). Notley thus distills her stance of disobedience into a refusal of the type of impositions, both societal and interpersonal, that human beings place on each other. Notley's new demeanor is "[b]ased on the supposition of harmful intent—/that another, male or female, even without realizing it /might very well want to hurt me, cause my subjugation" (*Disobedience* 272). In response, Notley formulates a "religion" whose principles are clear and striking—and framed mostly in the negative: "I don't propose an equalitarian lovingkindness or compassion. . . . /I propose, for women, always an instinctive wariness. /I propose, further, meditation in separate closets, without /instructions. That's /the whole religion. It never has to be proposed again /in order to exist" (*Disobedience* 272).

Notley's pared-down, negated self and adherence to a newly formed ethical and spiritual code results in a triumphant and direct realization of her aesthetics:

> a roar, a grace, a dialogue, a diary,
> and an individual
> act of disobedience, defiance of
> whoever comes to mind (*Disobedience* 282)

If the novel of the artist directs itself toward the artist's realization of creative purpose and aesthetic achievement, Notley's words here are among the most forceful statements in *Disobedience*, particularly as she announces herself as a tempestuous force of grace. The personal and intimate description of her poetry, as being like "a dialogue, a diary," might seem fragile or timid were it not also tied to her defiant, disobedient will. Here, Notley's clarity of purpose has materialized and is unsurpassed in its quiet determination by any other comment in the book.

At the very moment of this creative breakthrough, however, Notley remains consistent with her skeptical outlook and contemplates the

societal implications of *Disobedience*, posing questions of about her writing's practical impact:

> Have I fed anyone.
> Have I changed Your image of what a poem might be
> and so, in some part, changed "reality" (*Disobedience* 282)

Rather than derailing Notley's artistic breakthrough, such questions prove pivotal to the framing of the utopian concerns in the concluding pages of *Disobedience*. Notley's apprehensiveness about the external impact of her work—whether her poetry has "fed anyone"—succinctly poses a question about the purpose of utopian projects, a key matter for consideration in utopian studies. Jameson, for instance, has asked if it were not possible to "envision some zero-degree Utopia, a Utopia in which content was reduced to its most undeniable validity for all societies" (*Archaeologies* 172). To arrive at an answer of what minimal principle could govern utopian thought, Jameson cites a pared-down formulation put forth by Adorno that utopia can be found: "in only the coarsest demand: that no-one shall go hungry any more" (156). Notley's recognition that her poetry has not provided food to anyone would seemingly capitulate the fact that her poetry does not meet minimal utopian demands.

Disobedience, though, sets itself up to be read along an altogether different criterion. It is not to be read as a blueprint for utopia, a set of plans from which a new society can be built. Instead, Notley's purpose in *Disobedience* aligns itself with Bloch's valuation of the novel of the artist: her book dramatizes the type of creativity and imaginative work necessary to inspire change society in the future. On this point, Bloch is clear that the artist's novel has a "general task: not to neglect the producing factor in favor of the product, not to neglect the anticipatory factor either" (*Utopian Function* 276). Notley's poetry, thus, does not aim to be an end in itself, but, on the contrary, dramatizes the dynamic, open-ended process of creative thought, which is the fundamental component necessary to make social change possible. In its defiant, rejecting stance, *Disobedience* functions as an object lesson in a critical yet purposeful negativity.

By the end of *Disobedience*, Notley comes to the conclusion that her poetry best fulfills its utopian propensities by leaving itself open-ended as a means of addressing the future. It is the close adherence of *Disobedience* to the properties of the *kunstlerroman*, and its orientation toward the future,

that allows Notley to do so. The novel of the artist, Bloch maintains, "depends on revealing and shaping [material] in the not-yet that arises before us as that of the work" (*Utopian Function* 276). The artist's novel is consequently a genre premised upon becoming—both in terms of the artist's realization of herself and the production of a creative work. For Bloch, the essence of the artist's novel is encapsulated in the negative phrase "not-yet," whose wording places emphasis on the idea of becoming, of what yet could be. This is why Notley's stated concern of not having "fed anyone" is the wrong criterion with which to judge the utopian content of *Disobedience* or any other novel of the artist; such a demand is too teleological and final. Instead, Bloch argues that the artist's novel must be understood and valued for its forward-leaning bent, whose purpose is not to be prematurely foreclosed: "No story that is a good story about production places a period behind this element of the harbinger. Yes, this element is a harbinger, this anticipatory illumination lives right in those *really accomplishing* works" (*Utopian Function* 277).

The same desire not to foreclose the harbinger of a utopian possibility is present for Notley as well. Her ambivalence about ending her poem speaks to a similar wariness of finality. In the final section of *Disobedience*, "THE USUAL AND THE MOST TENUOUS OF GOODBYES," Notley articulates her loathing of "plac[ing] a period" at the end of her work. It is in the penultimate section, though, where Notley addresses the equivalent of Bloch's "anticipatory illumination," writing as if to forestall the end:

> When to end—
> ending itself will tell me. It always does.
> Maybe not in this poem, maybe the next (*Disobedience* 279)

Notley speaks here with a different tone about concluding her work. Whereas before Notley would talk of ending her poem with uncertainty and angst, calmness now infuses her speech, and she seems less embattled by the prospect of finishing *Disobedience*. Wanting her work to come to an organic ending, Notley leaves, moreover, the ending itself open, whose resolution need not be immediate, but can be put off, agreeably, until another time.

Notley's composure at the end of the book *Disobedience* reverses her earlier nervous preoccupations about the book's ending and coincides with a renewed outlook on the future, which the book's final pages

come to represent. At the start of *Disobedience*, Notley's arrival in Paris had induced feelings of uneasiness, leaving Notley with reservations about her ability to adjust to her new home. The cost of uprooting herself from America had caused Notley to be wary, her choice producing a bitter taste in her mouth: "it's so ugly to be here [in Paris] /with salt on my tongue, of dying into /a worse future I'm leaving /that you can't change" (*Disobedience* 26).

By the end of book, however, Notley's attitude about the future has shifted, and her conception of how events might unfold is left optimistically open. The very last words of *Disobedience* register a diametrically opposed sense of the promise of the future:

> I've found a peaceful circular ride
> in an amusement park at night
> I could ride it forever (*Disobedience* 281)

Notley decides upon a manner of ending *Disobedience* that is simultaneously joyous and calm, and her resolve to conclude her book paradoxically derives from an appreciation of an endless "circular ride." The utopian lift that concludes *Disobedience* remains purposely figurative, an amusement park ride becoming the jubilant metaphor of continuity and openness.[1] Notley thereby avoids placing "a period behind this element of the harbinger," with the shape that the future might take being projected but, importantly, not specified.

Notley thus holds to a measured optimism about the future that she shares with Ernst Bloch. In writing an ending that does not fully end, that maintains its openness about the future, Notley exhibits Bloch's beliefs about the utopian content of literary texts: "Every great work of art, above and beyond its manifest content, is carried out according to a latency of the page to come, or in other words, in light of the content of a future which has not yet come into being, and indeed of some ultimate resolution as yet unknown" (qtd. in *Marxism and Form* 149). Merging the detective story with the artist's novel, Notley consciously makes *Disobedience* a book about books, focused upon the act of discovery of both self and artistic purpose. The pages entailed within *Disobedience* thus yield clues as to who Notley has been and how she should write, and the unwritten work before her points, both defiantly and optimistically, to a future yet to come.

Note

1. That Notley might choose an amusement park for a final figure for utopian promise is in line with Bloch's understanding of such spaces. As Oliver Herwig and Florian Holzherr write, "Ernst Bloch saw the amusement park as a fantastic dream world, a subtly, vulgar borderland" (22).

CHAPTER 6

Afterword—Not Yet the End: the Resistance to Closure in Bloch's Anticipatory Consciousness and Contemporary Experimental Poetry

Abstract This chapter illustrates the ways in which the "rejection of closure" in experimental poetry finds its counterpart in Bloch's concept of anticipatory consciousness. If the promise of utopia can be forecast as what is on the horizon, as an event that has "not yet" occurred, the open-ended compositional methods of contemporary poets have a corresponding objective: to use negative phrasing and a poetics of negation as a means of forestalling closure and anticipating the possibility of utopia.

Keywords Rejection of closure · Experimental poetry · Utopia · Ernst Bloch Negation · Anticipatory consciousness

The predicament in which Alice Notley finds herself of not wanting to end her book in the final pages of *Disobedience* is one that could be extended to all experimental poets whose work addresses and projects utopian ideals. Notley's inclination not to end her poem stems from a desire to avoid foreclosing the possibilities for utopian change by delimiting it. The deferred ending of *Disobedience* is also an acknowledgement that the work necessary to achieve utopia must be continuously ongoing and frequently redirected. As the concluding pages of *Disobedience* unfold, the prospects for utopia remain open-ended and unfinished, indicating a future on the horizon toward which society might aspire.

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Notley's impulse not to end her poem finds a correlative in Bloch's concept of anticipatory consciousness, his recurrent appeal to understand utopia as something that has "not yet" arrived. For Bloch, the aspiration for utopia can be unearthed from daydreams and artistic works, yielding what he calls "expectant emotions" and "expectant ideas," affects and thoughts that project the possibility of utopia. Once these hopeful impulses are discovered, they can be channeled, Bloch writes, into a new sensibility, an awareness of the potential for utopian social change: "Both future-orientated intentions, that of expectant emotions and that of expectant ideas, accordingly extend into a Not-Yet-Conscious, that is, into a class of consciousness which is itself to be designated not as filled, but as anticipatory" (*Principle of Hope* 113). Accordingly, literary works that encompass the not-yet consciousness of social change must not be considered complete in and of themselves; they are not finished—or "filled"—but possess, rather, the promise or anticipation of change.

Bloch's utopian principles, premised as they are on the dynamics of anticipation, remain open-ended in their description of utopian goals. Anticipatory consciousness is not a mindset intent on being fixed in advance. Instead, it derives its power by being attuned to the future in a positive and openly expectant manner:

> The Not-Yet-Conscious is thus solely the preconscious of what is to come, the psychological birthplace of the New. And it keeps itself preconscious above all because in fact there is within it a content of consciousness which has not become wholly manifest, and is still dawning from the future . . . The forward dream is disposed towards this, and [the] Not-Yet-Conscious, as the mode of consciousness of something coming closer, is charged with it; here the subject scents no musty cellar, but morning air.
>
> (*Principle of Hope* 116)

Here, Bloch's figurative language, predicated on images of dawn and morning, expresses a hopeful openness; the future is, for Bloch, in a state of becoming, as yet unrealized. This latent quality within the future importantly leaves room for human participation and action, with the inference being that society can be shaped toward a utopian outcome. In order for such work to be done, however, the utopian, anticipatory consciousness must be unfettered, developed through a process of clear and open thought: "The most advanced consciousness thus operates even in memory and oblivion not as in a sunken and hence closed space, but in an

open space, that of process and its Front" (Bloch, *Principle of Hope* 141). In conceiving of the anticipatory mindset as an open process, Bloch rejects any kind of closure that would inhibit what he calls the "forward dream," that is, new and future social possibilities for the realization of utopia.

If Bloch's anticipatory consciousness points toward the future, unfolding not as a fixed and certain image of the ideal but as a process continuously getting humanity closer toward a utopian horizon, one might wonder if there is an ending, a terminal point, that corresponds to Bloch's idea of a "forward dream." Ruth Levitas has argued that an implied end or goal can, in fact, be discerned in Bloch's thought, particularly in the distinction that he draws between abstract utopia and concrete utopia—between the type of utopian wishing that remains merely an unfulfilled daydream and the more concrete, productive thought that could lead to social change. As Levitas explains, Bloch considers "Abstract utopia [to be] fantastic and compensatory. It is wishfull thinking, but the wish is not accompanied by a will to change anything.... Concrete utopia, on the other hand, is anticipatory rather than compensatory. It reaches forward to a real possible future, and involves not merely wishfull but willfull thinking" (67). Guiding one's efforts toward concrete utopia is an informed and concerted form of thinking that Bloch designates with the Latin phrase *docta spes*, or educated hope. As Levitas writes, "[e]ducated hope, *docta spes*, is born out of and articulates this relationship between ends and means, passion and reason, aspiration and possibility. It represents the transformation of wishfull thinking into wish-full and effective acting..." (73).

Though Levitas finds much that is admirable in Bloch's premises of concrete utopia and educated hope, she also questions some aspects of his writing on utopia, finding objectionable Bloch's tendency for imprecision and ambiguity. Levitas maintains that Bloch does not go quite far enough in articulating his ideas, contending that the distinction between abstract utopia and concrete utopia is "insufficiently spelled out" and rests "upon teleological closure" (78). As an alternative, Bloch could have, Levitas suggests, endowed "the hope for a transformed future with a specifically socialist content" (78). For Bloch's ideas to be more effective, they must arise "out of political, rather than epistemological necessity – out of the commitment to the realization of utopia through, as well as rehabilitation within, Marxism" (78). Levitas' critique of Bloch's views mostly concerns the practical outcome of his utopian philosophy and the loose relationship she sees between his utopian ideas and the Marxist philosophy he

espouses. Levitas is at her most salient when she questions the practicable nature of Bloch's principles and persuasively takes Bloch to task for assuming that a utopia is "somehow objectively given as the end of a teleological unfolding of what we have all 'really' wanted since time immemorial" (79).

At various moments in *The Principle of Hope*, however, Bloch does address the real-world implications of his ideas and stresses the work necessary to carry out utopian change. Bloch writes, "Even in the unusual form in which it appears, this premonition [of anticipatory consciousness] is the feeling of what is on the way. When it becomes creative, it combines with the imagination, particularly with that of the objectively Possible. This premonition with its potential for work is intellectual productivity, understood here as *work-forming*" (*Principle of Hope* 122). Bloch here tellingly weds mental work (whether philosophical or literary) with reality (what is "objectively Possible"), and the emphasis on the word *work* further connotes that this activity must occur—or have repercussions—in the real world. Bloch's language implies that changing society is a physical and collective effort and cannot be undertaken *solely* as an intellectual exercise or as something inevitable. As Bloch later says, "without the strength of an I and we behind it, even hoping becomes insipid. There is never anything soft about conscious-known hope, but a will within it insists: it should be so, it must become so. The wishful and volitional streak vigorously bursts out within it, the intensive element in venturing beyond, in acts of overhauling" (*Principle of Hope* 147). Bloch is not unaware that the utopian hope must be carried out—in action—within the physical realm; real, actual change is the end toward which his ideals aspire.

While Bloch may have a real and possible end—that of utopian social change—in store for his belief in the "forward dream" of anticipatory consciousness, his reluctance to detail a specific plan for achieving this aim needs further commentary. Bloch's aversion to outlining a predetermined utopian solution stems from his opposition to "blueprint utopians," those writers, as Russell Jacoby describes, who "have detailed what the future will look like; they have set it out; they have elaborated it; they have demarcated it" (31). As Jacoby further explains, "[s]uch details can bestow on utopian speculation a certain weight and plausibility . . . Yet the strength of the blueprinters is also their weakness. The plans betray, and sometimes celebrate, a certain authoritarianism. They say this is the way people *must* dress; this is the hour they *must* eat. . . . The blueprints not only appear repressive, they also rapidly

become dated" (32). Jacoby claims Bloch belongs, not with blueprint utopians, but with a group he calls the "iconoclastic utopians," progressive thinkers who resisted making representations or images of utopia; they were "without precise maps, yet utopians nonetheless" (34). Bloch's *The Spirit of Utopia*, Jacoby believes, proves itself to be a great work of utopian thought, exploring "inwardness, music, and soul" yet "[n]ot a sentence addresses the size of the sleeping quarters" (34). Bloch's objective in detailing the processes behind anticipatory consciousness, thus, is to strike a balance between articulating the viability of utopia and leaving open and undetermined the precise means of its realization.

Contemporary experimental poetry has likewise displayed an interest in open-endedness and an aversion to closed principles in a manner that corresponds closely to the open, boundless qualities of Bloch's "anticipatory consciousness." Lyn Hejinian's landmark essay "The Rejection of Closure," for example, issues a call for open forms that not only resonates with Bloch's thinking but also demonstrates how utopian ideals can be correlated to experimental poetry. A central dilemma that poets confront, Hejinian argues, is the navigation between rules that close off or circumscribe the possibilities for meaning and compositional practices that would lead to unrestrained, innovative expression: "The writer experiences a conflict between a desire to satisfy a demand for boundedness, for containment and coherence, and a simultaneous desire for free, unhampered access to the world prompting a correspondingly open response to it" (41). Rejecting compositional strategies that seek to preserve the writer's control over a text, and thereby producing a closed, "single reading of it," Hejinian instead promotes what she calls the open text: "The 'open text,' by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader, it invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive" (43).

Hejinian's ideas about the participatory dynamics of writing that involve the reader—and the analogous political implications of such an approach—speak to a utopian mindset that wants to alter the ways in which literary meaning is produced and mitigate against unequal sociopolitical relations. To achieve such an end, Hejinian considers the ongoing, procedural aspects of writing and reading of paramount importance: "The 'open text' often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by

readers, and thus resists cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification" (43). For Hejinian, the rejection of closure entails a continual process of the making of meaning, with every text remaining open, expanding its possibilities with every reader that it encounters.

The belief in an open, compositional process that Hejinian advocates for the writing of poetry has its equivalent in utopian studies. Fredric Jameson, in a review of Louis Marin's *Utopiques*, has made similar contentions about the dynamic properties of utopian ideals as they surface in literature. To apprehend properly the utopian potential of a given literary work, Jameson advises that one must "grasp [utopian discourse] as a process, as energeia, enunciation, productivity, and [thereby] implicitly or explicitly . . . repudiate that more traditional and conventional view of Utopia as sheer representation, as the 'realized' vision of this or that ideal society or social ideal" ("Of Islands and Trenches" 6). Such a view of literature as constituting a process has the virtue of not closing off utopian ideals as they are emerging and forming, and the idea of a dynamic utopian process also reflects the way that social change must itself develop as a process. This procedural conception of utopian principles coheres, as Jameson explains, with Bloch's core belief that utopia advances toward the future through a process, one that achieves its advancements in increments: "little by little . . . the world becomes a version of some primal figure, a manifestation of that primordial movement toward the future and toward the ultimate identity with a transfigured world which is Utopia" (*Marxism and Form* 120).

The emphasis Jameson places on conceiving utopia as process and the open, unbounded quality of Bloch's anticipatory consciousness reinforce the idea that it is best not to comprehend or approach literary works as static, final blueprints for utopian ideals. As Jameson argues, "when [a] literary work attempts to use . . . Utopian material directly, as content, in secular fashion, as in the various literary Utopias themselves, there results an impoverishment which is due to the reduction of the multiple levels of the Utopian idea to the single, relatively abstract field of social planning" (*Marxism and Form* 146). A solution, in Jameson's view, is to make the matter of utopian figuration in literary texts "a *formal* one, inasmuch as [utopian impulses have] less to do with the wishing of the hero alone than with the development of all the various elements of the work through . . . [the deployment of] form" (*Marxism and Form* 146). A proper apprehension of utopian energies, Jameson concludes, relies upon being able to

read the form of a literary work as manifesting utopian propensities in conjunction with its content, so that "the content and the formal impulse of the texts themselves [stand] as figures—whether of psychic wholeness, of freedom or of the drive towards Utopian transfiguration—of the irrepressible revolutionary wish" (*Marxism and Form* 159).

Jameson's focus on the formal properties of utopian literary works provides some clarity about how *not* to treat the utopian projects of experimental poets as blueprints but as works that convey utopian ideals as an open-ended process through rhetoric and form. As I have tried to show, contemporary experimental poets do so by using rhetorical negation—or the strategies of negative theology— both to say and not to say what utopia is. The strategies of negative theology circumscribe god's being but do so without any sense of finality or closure. So too, do the compositional strategies of contemporary experimental poets work to convey utopian principles. This approach is one in which the act of figuring utopia remains open-ended—generated by a process of negation—and results in a literary text whose image of utopia is not fully given, or drawn out, by the text, and is thereby left open. The concept of utopia in these poems must be completed through an act of interpretation and recognition of what is stated indirectly. Utopia, in these poets' writing, is implied yet never foreclosed, never distilled into a blueprint whose guidelines resolve into a set and final social order. Even Charles Bernstein's ideal polis—that of discord and contentiousness—never fully resolves into a final image; the perpetual argument and dispute of his ideal society would, presumably, continuously evolve and be ever changing.

Negation is both a rhetorical and formal device for contemporary experimental poets whose work projects the concept of utopia. Rhetorical negations—speech that is phrased or constructed in the negative—is fairly easy to observe once one is attuned to looking for it, yet what might be less readily recognizable is negation as a formal device. Such formal negation operates in concert with rhetorical negations to produce a void or gap that, despite the negativity of this absence, still conveys or yields meaning. In Hejinian's "The Rejection of Closure," there is, for instance, a telling description of negation, in the form of negative space, in Hejinian's description of the anti-closure devices in her writing:

> One of the results of this compositional technique, building a work out of discrete fields, is the creation of sizable gaps between the units. To negotiate this disrupted terrain, the reader (and I can say also the writer) must overleap

> the endstop, the period, and cover the distance to the next sentence. Meanwhile, what stays in the gaps remains crucial and informative. Part of the reading occurs as the recovery of that information (looking behind) and the discovery of newly structured ideas (stepping forward). (46)

Hejinian's remarks here sound strikingly close to the strategies of negative theology; negation, absence and silence all work toward indirect expression—of saying something by not saying it directly. While Hejinian does not articulate a explicitly utopian politics in this passage, her desire to upend "social, economic and cultural" hierarchies (quoted previously) and her advocacy of "the discovery of newly structured ideas [and] (stepping forward)" reveals her compositional methods to be compatible with utopian projects and the underlying sentiments of Bloch's anticipatory consciousness.

Hejinian's description of her compositional strategies recalls Charles Bernstein's own comparison of his writing methods to a Möbius strip, quoted previously in the chapter on Bernstein and apophasis, where Bernstein relates his aim "not [to] conceptual[ize] the field of the poem as a unitary plane," so that the poem is "pulled into a moebius-like twisting momentum," it yields "gaps and jumps [that] compose a space of shifting parameters" (*Content's Dream* 38). Like Hejinian, Bernstein sees the value of producing lacunae and voids, whose negative qualities add rather than detract from the meaning of the poem, and the continuous, "moebius-like" twists confer upon the poem a continuous quality that resists closure. There are other examples in the critical essays of experimental poets embracing compositional techniques premised upon negation and the gaps or negative spaces that such techniques create. To take one example, Ron Silliman's description of the new sentence, in his influential essay primarily addressed to prose poetry but relevant to the aims and practices of experimental poetry as a whole, likewise makes much of the idea of absence and negation: "The new sentence is a decidedly contextual object. Its effects occur as much between, as within, sentences. Thus it reveals the blank space, between words and sentences, is much more than the 27th letter of the alphabet. It is beginning to explore and articulate just what those hidden capacities might be" (92).

The open-ended qualities of Hejinian's, Bernstein's, and Silliman's formal and compositional practices speak to a larger interest in experimental poetry to use negation to stave off closure. These techniques of negation are, as well, a means of addressing the idea of utopia, adhering to a strategy to be found in the principles of negative theology. Negative theology, as Jacques Derrida once indicated, succeeds in so far as it is

incomplete, falling short of its mark: "Every time I say: X is neither this nor that, neither the contrary of this nor of that, neither simple neutralization of this nor of that with which it has *nothing in common*, . . . I would start to speak of God, under this name or another. . . . God's name would suit everything that may not be broached, approached, or designated, except in an indirect and negative manner" (6). Suffused with negation and pointedly provisional ("I would start to speak of"), Derrida's description of negative theology was, of course, meant to mimic the very strategies of negative theology. As Derrida implies, he gets closer to speaking of God's being as he leaves the matter open and unspecified and avoids closing off his description. A lack of directness, a tactic of circumlocution, and a negative void where a positive assertion might rest, all prove functional in alerting one to the idea of God without disclosing it completely.

Frank Kermode has suggested that Derrida makes use of a rhetorical device called aposiopesis, "defined as an artifice in which 'the speaker comes to a sudden halt, as if unwilling or unable to proceed, though something not expressed must be understood' (OED)" (89). As Kermode further explained, "the rhetorical uses of aposiopesis are various: you can use it when, like Derrida, you wish to draw attention to the actual predicament of the speaker, hindered by the very processes of his own thought from moving on, from saying what comes next . . . " (89). This is the same strategy that experimental poets take when they use rhetorical and formal negation to project utopia. There is, moreover, in this strategy of negation and a refusal of closure, consistency between experimental poetics, the principle of negative theology, and utopian objectives, as reflected in Bloch's notion of "anticipatory consciousness."

As Norman Finkelstein writes, there is a "radical openness of Bloch's interpretations, in his hopeful belief in utopia that has 'not yet' arrived" (*Utopian Moment* 148). Bloch's anticipatory consciousness continuously directs itself forward, "while at the same time indicating the incompleteness of every step along the way. Bloch's interpretive methods do not really aim for structural completion of a primary figure. . . . [Instead] the utopian moment . . . stands revealed [in] that very moment when the text most strenuously resists thematic or interpretive closure" (*Utopian Moment* 148). In their invocations of utopia, contemporary experimental poets pursue a path set forth by Bloch in his pursuit of arriving at an anticipatory consciousness. The process for achieving utopia must remain open and resist closure, with progress achieved and measured in steps that are lucidly critical of present society but fully aware of the possibilities for change.

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Index

A
Adorno, Theodor, 6–8, 12
Apophasis, 67–68, 70, 76, 77, 79, 82, 85, 89, 124

B
Bakhtin, Mikhail, 76, 109
Baudrillard, Jean, 52
Bergvall, Caroline, 80
Bernstein, Charles, 3, 11, 12–13, 68–90
Bloch, Ernst, 6–8, 10, 12, 13, 18, 26, 43–44, 55, 59, 62, 63, 91–95, 99, 100, 102–104, 106, 110, 113–115, 117–122, 124, 125
Bloom, Harold, 58
Bruns, Gerald, 38

C
Campion, Thomas, 26

D
De Certeau, Michel, 21
Derrida, Jacques, 2, 124–125
Dystopia, 12, 17–18, 22–23, 27, 33–35, 37–38, 42, 44, 46, 51–57, 59, 60–64, 79

E
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 38

F
Fenza, D.W., 83–84
Ferguson, Kennan, 73
Ferlinghetti, Lawrence, 52
Finkelstein, Norman, 5–6, 10, 23, 43–44, 125
Foucault, Michel, 5
Frost, Robert, 47–50, 60

G
Gibbons, Thomas, 79
Gioia, Dana, 83
Green, Fiona, 24
Gropius, Walter, 33

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H
Hartley, George, 68
Harvey, David, 30–31, 64, 74
Hebdige, Dick, 54
Hejinian, Lyn, 121–124
Howe, Susan, 11, 15–39
Hutcheon, Linda, 75

J
Jacoby, Russell, 6–7, 120–121
James, Bartlett, 19–23
James, William, 72, 97
Jameson, Fredric, 8, 14, 16, 19, 37, 88, 94, 110, 133, 122–123
Jones, Manina, 93

K
Kermode, Frank, 125

L
Labadie, Jean de, 11, 16–25
Language Poetry, 3–6, 11, 69, 83
Lazer, Hank, 77
Lentricchia, Frank, 48–50
Levine, Mark, 69
Levitas, Ruth, 119–120
LeWitt, Sol, 78

M
Mackey, Nathaniel, 11–12, 41–64
Martin, Terence, 9
McCaffery, Steve, 3–4
McKay, Claude, 81
Merivale, Patricia, 98
Mintz, Sidney, 65
More, Thomas, 7
Moylan, Tom, 17
Mullen, Haryette, 65

N
Nathanson, Tenney, 3–6, 76
Naylor, Paul, 49
Negation, 2, 6, 7–14, 17, 20–23, 29, 34–36, 42–48, 50, 54, 55, 74, 75, 77, 79, 86–88, 90, 95, 96, 100, 103, 106–108, 110–112, 123–125
Negative Theology, 1, 6–10, 14, 123–125
  and utopia, 6, 125
Nelson, Maggie, 95
Notley, Alice, 11–14, 92–115, 117–118
Novel of the Artist, 93–94

O
Olmsted, Fredrick Law, 11, 18, 27–32, 35–38

P
Perelman, Bob, 2–3
Perloff, Marjorie, 32, 77–78
Pound, Ezra, 52

Q
Quartermain, Peter, 15

R
Ramazani, Jahan, 45
Reinfeld, Linda, 3, 17
Robbins, Amy Moorman, 92

S
Shepherd, Reginald, 91
Siebers, Tobin, 58

Silliman, Ron, 3, 124
Simpson, Megan, 45–46
Skoulding, Zoe, 95
Soja, Edward, 51
Stevens, Wallace, 58
Sweeney, Susan Elizabeth, 98

U
Utopia, 1–3, 5–14, 15–20, 22–28, 30–35, 37–38, 41–46, 49, 51, 55, 57, 59, 61–64, 70–72, 74, 75, 79, 88–90, 92–95, 102, 103, 106, 110, 111, 113–115, 117–125
  and the artist's novel, 93–96, 103–104, 106, 113–115
  and detective novel, 92, 94
  and language writing, 2, 5, 11
  and negative theology, 6
  and the rejection of closure, 121–123

W
Walton, Priscilla L., 93
Williams, J.P., 10
Wolosky, Shira, 9–10